The Fairy's Bride

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Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Francis Dolarhyde/Will Graham, Will Graham & Abigail Hobbs, Abigail Hobbs & Hannibal Lecter
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The Fairy's Bride

by AGlassRoseNeverFades

Summary

"I imagine no matter the circumstances, the loss of one's mate must be a rather traumatizing experience, particularly after so many years bonded."

Will laughs, just once, a quick, dark, rich sound that causes the hairs at the back of Hannibal's neck to stand pleasantly on end. He does not shy away from eye contact with Hannibal the way he does with so many others, rubbing his thumb along his lower lip, enough to tug it gently out of place as he considers his response.

He curls his lip back into his mouth to wet it before asking, "Tell me, Doctor Lecter, have you ever been mated? Willingly or…otherwise." But for the barest tightening of his smile and a flash of something once brittle, now hardened, behind storm-colored eyes, one would never suspect the sort of madness and past traumas that lurk behind the omega's guarded cerulean gaze.

Not unless one knows exactly what to look for.

Notes

Translation into Spanish by AAlessandraFY available on Wattpad.

What. The. *Hell, Brain!* I thought we had a deal, man! No more new chaptered stories until I finished one of my other WIPs! And omg, did you have to come up with one *like this??*

~~This story exists now because I am utter despicable trash, sorry not sorry.~~

Please mind the tags and archive warnings before you proceed. Also, if you notice ANYTHING potentially triggering or worrisome that I neglected to tag, please, please let me know and I will fix it right away, I promise!!

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: The Fairy's Bride 牙仙的新娘 by takethebluepill

The Rape of Ganymede

I. The Rape of Ganymede

Lying alone in his twin bed, Will Graham twists and squirms, aching and feverish all over as if he has the flu. He wishes it were the flu. His fingers dig into the heavy weighted blanket around his shoulders, torn between wanting to pull it around himself tighter so he can burrow underneath and wanting to throw it off entirely. His throat clicks as he swallows dryly, stifling a low whimper behind sealed lips before it can escape entirely.

It has been a couple of hours since Mrs. Marlow came up to check on him. She had told him before it started that he should come to her directly if he needed anything at all, had been insistent on that point, stating with a sisterly wink that she would understand better than Mr. Marlow what he was going through, being an omega herself. She was lying. Will knows it has more to do with the way her husband has been sniffing around him lately in the days leading up to his heat than any real sense of omegan solidarity. As if Will would ever let that slimy, boring, disgusting beta touch him anyway.

It's hard not to resent his foster parents. Mrs. Marlow really means well, or tries to at least. Mr. Marlow generally ignores him, heading straight for the den when he gets home from work and flipping on the sports channel, barely noticing the quiet, troubled sixteen-year-old who has taken up residence in their guest room except for times such as these, when he is suddenly reminded of the boy's gender and leers at Will instead like he's a hot piece of ass when he thinks his wife isn't looking.

This is the second heat Will has experienced since his father died, and the first since he moved into the Marlow household. Will would never feel embarrassed around his dad during his heats because there is nothing inherently *sexual* about them without a viable partner around to trigger those instincts. It just feels...a lot like the flu.

He misses the way his dad used to sing him to sleep on the really bad nights, bundling him up tighter in his blankets and wiping the sweat from his brow with a cool washcloth until the worst of it was over. He misses his dad, period. Will bites back another whimper, for a different reason this time, sniffling. Will misses his dad most of time even under normal circumstances, but usually he has a better handle on it, at least enough not to cry. He always gets more emotional when he's like this, however.

He can't fault Mrs. Marlow for lack of trying. She did try at first to act motherly, attempting to gentle him on his first night with careful pats on the head before Will jerked away and practically hissed. She had given up rather quickly on him after that, exasperated because it wasn't supposed to *be like this,* she had thought it would be so noble and romantic and fulfilling to take in a foster child, another gold star to add to her shining reputation as pillar of the community while also injecting some life back into her humdrum daily routine and perhaps back into her marriage as well, granting her the family she and Thomas had never

tried to have without all the extra work of having to raise a young child. She had expected some poor, sweet, tragic orphan with no one else to go to, not this taciturn, snarling, ungrateful little *hussy* she couldn't dare leave her Thomas alone in the house with. And really, *no wonder* he had no sense of stability or understanding what was good for him anyway what with his father moving them around like that all the time, and then being *careless* enough to die in *a boating accident of all things* when hadn't she heard fishermen were supposed to be strong swimmers, and he a professional one at that...?

Will had jerked away almost as much to shake her thoughts out of his head as to avoid her touch. He wonders sometimes if the fear and disgust would win out over her stubborn sense of pride and obsessive need to impress the other members at Rotary Club with her "noble self-sacrifice" if she understood just how well Will can see right through her.

"I know this must be so hard for you, sweetie," she'd said with false sympathy once his symptoms started this morning. "All the sweats and the pains and discomfort with none of the reward," she'd added, referencing his sterility as a *male* omega in an obvious attempt to twist the knife and prove her own superiority. Will couldn't help himself then, had been too irritable already since the day started not to point out that between the two of them, *he* wasn't the one desperate for something he could never have. The final nail in the coffin though had been asking if she still tried to convince herself that it was having a beta husband, and not early-onset menopause, that kept her from conceiving now.

He regrets saying it now, and is annoyed with himself for regretting it, because in that moment as her mask had slipped and her face had fallen just a little bit, he had seen not the awful fake bitch who devised subtle ways to punish her own foster son because she was *jealous,* and saw instead a lonely woman with too many regrets of her own and so much *fear* of losing everything she had while hiding it all behind a polished smile.

He'd barricaded himself in his own room all day after that before she could recover enough to send him upstairs herself. Not that it matters much in the end. Will suspects this is the last heat he'll be spending here before the Marlows kick him out and throw him back into the system. Even knowing that out of all of the foster homes he could have ended up in, this is probably not the worst of them, he nonetheless cannot bring himself to regret having to leave it now.

Shifting uneasily between half-sleep and half-wakefulness, hungry now after skipping both lunch and dinner but not wanting to go downstairs and have to face either of them, Will buries his head under the pillow and tries to nestle deeper into the center of the mattress instead. Time passes in a sick amorphous sludge, neither too fast nor too slow. Will feels outside of it, almost feels outside of himself, or at least he would if his nerve endings didn't sing like thrumming live wires with every offhand brush of fabric against his skin.

Even the soft cotton of his shirt and sweatpants itch uncomfortably and he wants badly just to tear them off. He is considering whether or not he should do just that when chaos breaks loose in the form of a terrible ear-splitting screech as the house alarm goes off. *Bang, bang!* he hears even with his hands pressed tightly against his ears, like a car backfiring only...not.

Bang! The sound echoes throughout the house one last time, until finally that and the shrill sirens are gone leaving only ringing silence in their wake.

*

With nothing now but blood dripping onto the floor and Theresa Marlow's sick gasping gurgles for breath filling the silence of the room, Francis Dolarhyde at last allows himself a small victorious smile, his heart thrumming in his chest with adrenaline and excitement as he stalks toward his prey, taking his time now because he can. There is no one here but him, a dead man, and this *woman,* a rabid putrescent sickness disguising itself as beauty. He has all the time in the world now to fix it, to make her *truly beautiful,* to—

He stills, heartrate picking up again as he carefully scents the air. This is...something is not right. There is another scent in the house that should not be, something he failed to notice right away after he kicked the door in, failed to notice when he was scouting just a week ago, hiding in the treeline across the street. It makes no sense, *it makes no sense,* the Marlows lived childless and alone, he was sure of it...

And yet there is no mistaking it, the smell a warm fevered sweetness that sticks to the back of his throat like honey, like sun-ripened peaches heavy on his tongue. An omega. An omega *in heat,* and definitely not the one drowning in a pool of her own blood at his feet.

A soft creak coming from the stairs, followed by a softer gasp, and Francis Dolarhyde slowly unfurls from his crouch over the dying woman, back straightening, before he turns fully and tilts his head upward to look.

What he sees is close enough to a waking dream that even *He* perks up and takes notice. What he sees is beauty.

What he sees is the Sun.

*

He shouldn't. Oh, *he shouldn't, he shouldn't, he shouldn't.*

Will's feet carry him halfway down the staircase anyway, silent and bare, stopping only a step above the first dark splash of Mr. Marlow's blood, still several steps above where Mr. Marlow's body is crumpled in a heap at almost the very bottom. There is a smaller fleck of blood Will hadn't noticed on the step he is standing on now, right underneath his foot. He can feel it seeping damp into the carpet, slick and warm against his skin. His muscles quiver and ache, making him shiver harder than he had been in his cold room alone. This no longer feels like the flu.

His shaking makes the steps creak and he gasps, knowing that he has now given himself away. Still he does not run, not yet, waiting on bated breath as the unknown alpha finally takes notice of him and turns around.

He looks strong and powerful, and the way he looks up at Will makes the boy almost keen at the back of his throat as a line of slick dribbles down the back of his leg.

The man's nostrils flare and he stiffens. Mr. and Mrs. Marlow both lay forgotten on the ground as he stalks past them and begins marching up the stairs.

Will's fight-or-flight instincts finally kick in and he stumbles backwards, nearly tripping over himself in his haste to turn tail and run.

He only makes it as far as the top landing, doesn't get more than a few steps towards the hall before a hand clamps around his ankle and yanks him backwards. Will falls facedown onto the carpeted floor with a pained yelp and tries to kick the alpha away, digging his fingers into the carpet as he attempts to lever himself forward. The alpha merely grabs that ankle as well and uses it as leverage to pull Will closer to him.

Will's fingertips burn as they lose their grip in the rough fibers and drag across the carpet. He is pulled backwards until he is forced into a kneel back on the stairs, surrounded on all sides by the figure crouched above and behind him, hot hands grabbing, sliding, touching him *everywhere.* One rough hand pushes his face back into the carpet while the other tears away his loose clothing. Will whimpers at the feeling of blunt fingernails scraping against his bare bottom even as a wave of fresh slick gushes from between his thighs.

A half-choked, snarling sound behind him, followed by the frantic rustle of clothing, a belt buckle being loosened, undone, a fly unzipped. Will renews his struggles, squirming, whether in fear or arousal it's difficult for him to tell now, but it seems to both delight and anger the alpha all at once as he twists Will bodily around to face him and yank what's left of the boy's shirt off around his head.

Gone is the careful control of the killer who broke into the house and shot Mr. Marlow cleanly through the neck, killing him instantly, then shot Mrs. Marlow with the same precision, aimed to paralyze rather kill so she could suffer. The alpha's eyes are wild and crazed. Will wonders if the man knows there is blood spatter on his cheek.

Of course he knows, of course. "You wanted to feel it," Will whispers hoarsely all of a sudden. The man's eyes widen, as if he had forgotten in the rut overtaking him that he and Will were animals that could *speak,* or perhaps simply in surprise because he had expected the boy's first words to him would be *'no'* or *'please,'* not..."You needed to be close enough to see her eyes as the bullet ripped through her spine, needed to *see* her realize how much she was going to suffer."

Will licks his lips, barely conscious of his own actions or the effect they can have as he lifts his hand to cradle the man's cheek, smearing the sticky droplets with his thumb as he speaks. "You needed to feel her blood and agony against your skin while it was still warm."

The alpha seizes Will's wrist then, turning his head to suck Will's thumb into his mouth with a moan, before grabbing Will's other wrist as well and pinning them both above the boy's head with one hand. Then with an exhalation of breath that is both growl and sob, he takes hold of the omega's knee and lifts it so he can spread his legs wider, and at last lines himself up and sinks into the wet, welcoming warmth that's been driving him mad since he first smelled the boy.

Will squeezes his eyes shut and screams, pain and pleasure intermingling as the alpha takes him relentlessly without giving either of them a chance to adjust or get used to it. Tears spring up and stick to his eyelashes as the alpha ruts into him, making him shiver and arch his back off the steps.

The alpha above him is equally noisy, groaning his pleasure and yet close to crying himself, muttering words like *'I can't'* and *'beautiful'* and *'angel.'* Will suddenly remembers Mrs. Marlow bleeding out onto the floorboards below. He wonders if she is still alive at this moment, still conscious, listening to the sounds of him being fucked and claimed and breathing in the smells of sex and death. The thought of it makes him clench and cant his hips higher, grunting and purring as the man takes him without mercy.

"Alpha!" he mewls desperately, clenching again harder, needy and unaware of what he's asking for.

The alpha makes a high keening sound, then releases Will's hands at last to pull his fingers tightly through Will's curls instead and force the boy to tilt his head back, exposing his lovely neck.

Will clutches the man's shoulders tightly through his jacket. His world shatters and burns and topples to the ground in smoldering, smoke-filled ruins at the feeling of teeth setting against his throat, and as they clamp down around his skin, he comes with a howl.

*

Later, *much, much later,* following a half-dazed stumble into an unmarked van and an hours-long car ride that had both of them sitting with their teeth on edge as his heat sweats had returned, after days of mindless rutting, mating, fervent touches, and sloppy kisses that had started up again from the moment Francis carried him into the drafty, creaking old house in the middle of nowhere and hadn't stopped since, Will Graham's heat finally ends.

Will lays back against the pillows, sweaty and exhausted, and watches lazily as the other man climbs out of bed. He watches the dark sprawling tattoo across the man's back shift and breathe like a living dragon with every movement of the man's muscles, until it disappears behind a dark blue silk kimono the man pulls on over his shoulders.

Will wonders which one of them it is looking down at him at this moment as the alpha turns around, the man or the dragon. Lingering vestiges of fear, longing, confusion, arousal, and something which neither of them have had much experience with before but both think might be *contentment* filters between their tenuous new bond faintly on a feedback loop.

Francis leans down and strokes his fingers over *his* omega's smooth, pale cheek, expression calm and unyielding as still waters. "You remind me of a poem I read once," he says softly, the first words either of them have spoken in hours. *"A robin redbreast in a cage."*

Will flinches a little at that statement, more so the implications behind it, and Francis withdraws his hand, brows drawn low almost in apology.

He takes a step back, awkward and shy now when he had been anything but just a moment before, and throughout their mating. Will's lips tug upwards at the sight, already growing fond and hoping to see more of the same.

The alpha turns away again to rifle through a tall wardrobe in the corner, and returns with another kimono, this one brightly patterned with splashes of white, red, and black. He holds it

open and Will gets up finally, turning around so he can put his arms through the sleeves and let his alpha slide it on over his shoulders. Will feels like he's being swallowed up by it, the garment obviously meant for a tall, well-built body like the one behind him rather than his own short, skinny frame, but he luxuriates in the cool, whisper-soft feel of it against his heated skin.

The alpha snares Will closer to cinch his robe up at the front, hands trembling ever so slightly, then sniffs, hiding his face in Will's curls although the boy can feel wetness forming there, against his temple.

"I am sorry, little robin," he whispers to keep his voice from quavering. *"I'm sorry, this wasn't supposed to happen, it wasn't, but you felt* so good, *and I—"*

Will turns his head and stops him from talking with a gentle press of his lips against the alpha's own. *"You felt good too,"* he confesses softly against the alpha's mouth, raising his hands to hold onto the arms still wrapped tightly around him.

The two of them remain like that for a very long while, as the room lightens and turns pink with the rising of the sun outside.

*

Six Years Later

This is it, Jack thinks solemnly as the flower delivery van pulls along carefully down the long, ambling backroad, the closest a man like him gets to nervous excitement. *If it's him, this will all finally be over.* They've got the bastard by the shorthairs now. He won't be getting away this time. No more families will have to die.

The papers have taken to calling this "the summer of serial killers," courtesy of one very tasteless article by Freddie Lounds. It is, sadly, not all that uncommon for multiple serial killers completely separate from one another to be active at the same time, but Lounds loves to sensationalize whenever she can, and as a result the higher-ups have been really riding Crawford's ass on this one. Seven missing girls in Minnesota over the last half-year. Three murdered families in as many months. It has been an exhausting damn year so far for all of them.

Lately, Prurnell has even taken to hinting that if something isn't done about either the abductions of the young omegan girls in Minnesota or the family annihilations happening across multiple state lines very soon, his job could be on the line.

The gruff alpha had politely refrained from pointing out that he and his team have been doing everything they can, no matter how stretched thin they've been since these wackos got started, and that it would be stupid of the bureau to take him off of either case now. Nor does he tell her that he doesn't give a damn about his job as much as he does about the innocent

lives that have been lost. He won't say it's because he thinks a pushy bureaucrat like her wouldn't understand that but...well.

What he also won't say, to anyone other than his wife and the most trusted members on his team, is that what's been keeping him up at night the most in both cases are not the horrors that he's seen, but the ones that have *not* been seen—the victims they haven't found yet. He hates the not knowing more than anything.

"Honestly, boss, hate to disagree but I'd say in the Tooth Fairy's case, it's *knowing too much* about this guy's MO that's gotta be the worst," Zeller had said, pulling a disgusted face, the last time they were in the lab going over case files. "We know more than we could ever want to about what happens to his victims."

"Not all of them," Jack had pointed out quietly.

It was Beverly who had pointed it out as they were processing the scene for the first slaughtered family. "This clearly wasn't his first rodeo," were her exact words as she stood photographing the detritus under Mrs. Jacobi's fingernails to be swabbed later.

They went through old unsolved cases involving similar MOs after that. They hadn't been difficult to find. This one had a...*habit* of leaving DNA evidence behind. Usually he liked to pay special attention to the women, whether they be betas or omegas. Usually when he killed children, he did it swiftly and virtually painlessly, and paid no attention to their bodies whatsoever before or after except to mutilate their eyes as he had done with all the victims over the past three months. Usually he left every one of his victims' bodies out in some sort of grisly display inside the house. Usually.

Jack looks through the reports one last time as they near the long, winding driveway to Dolarhyde Nursing Home, and finds himself once again staring down at the one photo they have on file of the Tooth Fairy's only exception.

The boy looks as if someone asked him to smile after they just made him swallow glass. That had been Jack's initial thought when he saw the photograph for the first time. In a sea of pictures full of happy children and happy families, it had stood out. The fact that he was no more than a footnote to Theresa and Thomas Marlows' murders in both the police report and news clippings from the local paper at the time had riled Jack then, and still does now.

He has the stark conviction that if the local PD at the time had just *done their damn jobs* and cared enough to look into what had happened to the boy whose picture they had paperclipped to the back of the file and scrawled underneath simply a name and a single line, *'Marlow's foster son, body not found,'* they might have caught this bastard a long time ago and maybe, *just maybe,* saved at least one life, not to mention the dozens of others that came afterward.

They have him now, he has to remind himself as they pull up at last to the imposing old manor, and not a moment too soon with less than a week before the next full moon.

"What now, boss?" Zeller asks as he puts the van in park and straightens his jacket, hoping it will help to disguise the fact that he's wearing a bulletproof vest underneath his plainclothes outfit. Jack is also in plainclothes, while hidden in the back Price and Katz are in their FBI-

issued vests in full gear, both of them in charge of radio chatter. Unseen from the house about half a mile back down the road are four other sedans full of armed agents that have followed behind.

“Now we deliver this man some flowers,” Jack says, getting out of the van. He lets Zeller carry the thin white box decorated with a bright red bow on it as they walk together to the front door.

Jack rings the doorbell, making sure to plaster on a friendly smile as he waits in view of the peephole.

After a few moments of silence and no answer to indicate anyone heard, he rings it impatiently once again. *“Coming!”* he hears someone call through the door this time. The voice seems younger somehow than he was expecting, but Jack puts that thought aside for now as he hears the lock turning.

“Good afternoon,” he says pleasantly as the door starts to come open, preparing to rattle off the mini-speech he had planned to go along with the pretense that they are deliverymen from a florist company. The rest of his words die in his throat, however, as the opening widens just enough for him to see who it is that answers.

“Uh, good afternoon,” says Will Graham, all grown up and in the flesh, looking up at the alphas on his doorstep from behind a pair of cheap plastic frames, a bemused expression on his face. “Is that, um, is that a package for me?” he asks awkwardly after a moment when Jack continues to stare and say nothing.

Jack realizes his lapse and recovers himself quickly. “Well, that depends,” he says with his best salesman smile. “Are you Mr. Francis Dolarhyde?”

The boy’s eyes dart very briefly over to the right, looking somewhere neither of them can see on the other side of the still partially open door, and that is enough to tell Jack that the boy’s awkward behavior is more than simple omegan shyness or submissiveness.

He nods rapidly, refusing to meet Crawford’s eyes as he says, “Yup. Yeah, that’s me.” And then there it is, the smile that’s weighed so heavily on Jack Crawford’s mind since he first noticed it all those months ago, the one that looks like it doesn’t know how to fit properly on the boy’s delicate features. That’s the moment Jack Crawford decides he’s had enough of this charade.

With a nod from his boss, Zeller quickly pulls the shotgun out of the box, letting the flimsy cardboard shell fall to the ground as he kicks the door open the rest of the way, causing the omega to jump back with a startled yelp, hands raised.

The alpha that steps into view from behind, however, seems anything but frightened by the situation as he grabs the omega in front of him and holds up a switchblade near the boy’s face.

“Drop the knife!” Jack bellows, pulling out his own sidearm.

“You have been privy to a great revelation, witness to my Becoming, and yet you see nothing!” the alpha says in answer, eyes cold with madness and hate. He presses the knife blade against Will’s cheek, the omega whimpering in response and clutching tightly to the alpha’s arms holding him in place, more as a clutch for balance than any real attempt to get away. It makes something in Jack’s chest clench to see it.

“Will Graham,” Jack says, deliberately gentling his voice as much as he can manage in this tense situation. “Will, look at me.” The boy does, seeming as much perplexed by the man’s use of his name as he is by everything else that’s been happening. “Everything’s going to be just fine,” Jack tells him. “You’ll get through this.”

He turns his gaze back to the alpha holding the omega hostage and says in the same reasonable tone, “Francis, lower your weapon and we can talk about this like civilized men. You don’t want to hurt Will, Francis, come on, we all know you don’t want that.” Jack hopes he’s right about that. The man had already kept the omega around for this long after all, hadn’t he? The tightness in his chest worsens as all the implications of that fact hit home, but he brushes it all aside, having no time to think about that right now.

Francis ducks his head behind Will’s, whispering something only the omega can hear. The omega starts shaking then, tears springing to his eyes, and Francis tightens his grip, pressing the knife further. *“Francis,”* the boy sobs. “Frankie, please, *please.”*

Dolarhyde locks gazes with Jack once more, despair and resolve intermingled with all that rage and insanity now, and Jack understands exactly what the man intends to do.

He takes the shot, just as a bead of blood wells up from the tip of the blade pressing into the boy’s cheek. The bullet enters cleanly through the center of Francis Dolarhyde’s forehead, and the knife veers off-course as the alpha falls backwards, streaking a long scratch down the omega’s face before it clatters to the floor. Better that than embedding itself deep into the boy’s cheekbone as Francis had intended.

There is a long moment in which time seems to stretch before them, as Will Graham stumbles sideways and clutches dazedly at the side of his face. Jack sees the look that flickers behind blue eyes even before the boy turns to look behind him, the same look that Jack knows will be in his own expression someday when his Bella finally gives up the good fight, that dim haunted recognition of a connection being forever severed.

He is therefore unsurprised when the omega suddenly launches himself at him, snarling and violent as his mate had been only moments before.

It takes a surprising amount of strength for him to hold the omega back, keeping teeth and fingernails from getting too close to his face. *“Don’t shoot, just get him restrained!”* Jack yells when he hears several pairs of boots run into the house in force. It takes three of them to subdue Graham, wrestling him to the floor and pinning him down.

The fight goes out of him finally, the crazed expression on his face crumpling into one of distress and sorrow that’s much harder for Jack to look at. The boy squeezes his eyes shut then and parts his lips to let out a low, anguished wail. Every alpha in the room and some of the betas immediately wince.

"Will somebody shut him up?" one of the other agents yells out as the howl continues, stretching and reverberating loudly enough to set Jack's teeth on edge. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Zee approaching the boy, turning the shotgun as if preparing to hit him with the butt of it.

"Zeller, get ahold of yourself!" Jack commands, and the man stops mid-stride, lowering his weapon with a chastened expression as he realizes what he was about to do. Every alpha tends to have a different instinctive reaction to the sound of an omegan cry, some worse than others, and Jack can't help thinking to himself that paramedics better get in here quick before somebody else tries something stupid. He doesn't want to have to beat down one of his own men into submission.

Fortunately the EMTs arrive before things can get more out of hand, and one of them slides a needle into the boy's arm to sedate him before lifting him up and putting him on a stretcher.

"Jack," Beverly says from beside him, a soft frown on her face as she takes in the whole scene of a boy they thought long dead being loaded into an ambulance, while the man they've been hunting for months gets zipped up into a body bag and wheeled out shortly after.

"I know." He turns to her then and says, "Go ride with him. We'll need someone to break the news to him and question him when he comes to, and it...it shouldn't be the man he just saw shoot his mate in the head." He frowns, uncomfortable and annoyed with himself for letting it show how much this situation has gotten to him.

Katz smiles, daring enough to pat him comfortingly once on the shoulder before turning away and obeying the order.

This is a good day, Jack Crawford reminds himself. They put down the bad guy. They saved a life, one none of them had thought there had been any hope of saving. One whose innocence may have been irrevocably lost, true, but still one with a chance of one day picking up the pieces and becoming whole again. This is a good day.

He watches as the ambulance disappears down the drive, and wills himself to believe it.

The Angel of Revelation

Chapter Notes

By the way, since I forgot to mention this before, every chapter of this story will be named after a different painting or artwork that I consider in some way emotionally or thematically relevant to that chapter. There are a lot of pieces called "The Rape of Ganymede" that the first chapter can be said to be inspired by, so take your pick there, but my personal favorite is the one by Damiano Mazza.

The title for this chapter is based on a work by William Blake. Seems fitting, wouldn't you say?

Also, no Hannibal as of yet this chapter (sorry!), but don't worry, he'll be making his entrance soon, as will a certain someone else I hope you'll all be happy to see. ^_~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

II. The Angel of Revelation

"...alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away."

Will blinks his eyes open slowly, stretching out a bit as he breathes in deeply through his nose. The steady, gentle voice that had been with him as he lay there in the liminal space between dream and reality, and most likely for longer besides, tapers off now, the soft thump of a book being closed the only sound in the room now aside from the beeping of the heart monitor.

The woman sitting next to his bed is no one he has ever seen before, certainly not the same one from the FBI who rode with him to the hospital and has stopped by to check on him a couple of times since, though Will was mostly very out of it and not really up for visitors on any of those occasions. The last he remembers seeing of her is just a glimpse of her frame in the open doorway, blurred and out of focus because of the sedative the doctors had given him after they caught him trying to tear off the bandage over his neck so he could dig his nails into the old claiming bite and try to open it up again.

That was several days ago though. Will is more himself again now, more lucid and rational, and not so inclined towards self-harm. It's still probably for the best that they sent someone else this time, so he doesn't have to face the embarrassment of talking with someone who's seen him at his worst.

The beta woman folds her hands in her lap, over the book she was reading from, and seems to be waiting politely to let Will speak first whenever he's ready. She has a very pretty smile. He hasn't decided yet if that makes him want to trust her more or less.

"Isn't Flannery O'Connor a little bleak to be reading at somebody's bedside?" he asks finally, voice still rough from sleep. He snorts when her eyebrows lift up in mild surprise. "Louisiana and Georgia are only a stone's throw away from each other, miss. I'm very familiar with her particular brand of Southern grotesque."

"You caught me," she says, eyes crinkling in amusement. "Flannery O'Connor is a personal favorite of mine. I even tried to raise peacocks once because she raised them. They were very stupid birds."

He snorts once again, partly genuine, partly because he knows it's the response she's aiming for. *Put him at ease before the difficult questions come.* He knows she's about to get to the real purpose of her visit when she straightens up slightly in her seat.

"My name is Doctor Alana Bloom," she tells him. "I'm a psychiatrist, though I also teach and consult at the FBI Academy at Quantico."

Will doesn't mean to groan aloud, he honestly doesn't, but the sound escapes past his lips anyway as he sits up in bed. He tries to pass that off as the reason but knows he probably isn't fooling her. He turns his head to look at her better, his eyes going no higher than her chin, and feels the bandage on his neck pull a bit as he does so. The medical tape over the cut on his cheek pulls as well as he forces a smile. "Thanks, but no thanks. I don't need therapy, Doctor Bloom."

"You just came out of a very difficult ordeal, Will," she reminds him gently. As if a reminder is what he needs.

'Did I come out of it?' he almost wants to ask but doesn't, finding it too melodramatic and not helpful to his case besides. "I'm guessing by your tone I don't get much choice in this, do I?" he asks, trying not to sound too bitter and probably failing at that too.

"I want to help you, Will. I understand it may be too much to ask you to trust me just yet, but I'd like us to at least try." It may be the sincerity of her words, the soothing beta tone and attitude, or just his weariness with the whole situation, but Will can't find it in himself to argue with her further.

In a couple of days he is released from the general hospital, no longer deemed an immediate threat to himself or others, only to be admitted at Port Haven Psychiatric Facility, a care facility in Baltimore catered specifically to troubled and traumatized omegas. It goes without saying that he will not be returning to the defunct nursing home that spanned the whole of his life for the past six years, and good riddance. He never cared much for the creepy place honestly, though he does find it more than a little ironic that he seems to keep flitting from one gilded cage to another since no one will let him fly free.

The whole facility is done in calm, soothing colors with decorative flourishes designed to give it a warm, homey feel, the walls painted beige and teal or wallpapered with bland

patterns of dusty pink flowers that blend into the background. Even the door to his room is paneled with windows of colored textured glass that allow him to see the shadows of people passing by while still obscuring enough to keep some semblance of privacy.

Everything about the place is perfectly planned and calculated to make it feel like a place of comfort and relaxation rather than isolation and captivity. The fact that it doesn't work very well on him is not the fault of the interior designers. Will is already well-versed in making the connection between even the coziest of houses and the reality of how easily they can still function as an effective prison. Even as a relatively happy kid, he and his dad would move around so much that no place ever really felt like home to him anyway, so it means nothing to know that this place will be no exception.

He stands in front of the mirror in his tiny personal bathroom, gazing long at the now fully uncovered marks of his time with Francis—the claiming bite still a little pink from his recent clawing but already fading to almost invisible again, and the thin, crooked crescent-shaped scar that starts from the point of his cheekbone and curves back nearly to the corner of his mouth, only millimeters away from his lips—both now the two most prominent features on the left side of his face and neck.

He's wearing the same clothes he was admitted to the hospital in. The collar of his shirt is flecked brown, either from his own blood or…the thought makes him ill, so he doesn't finish it. He stops looking. This outfit—the glasses, the shoes, the clothes on his back—is literally all that's left of what he owns. He's already had it explained to him by a very bored-sounding lawyer that all of Francis's property—which is to say *everything* since Will has technically been legally dead for six years and has no right to any of it—would be auctioned off and sold, the profits divvied up evenly between the families of the victims as reparations for their loss.

For all of about half a second, Will had thought about filing for reparations as a victim himself, so he could at least get a little bit of *something* out of it as well, maybe his clothes and his books at least, but he thought better of it almost immediately. It feels disingenuous and dishonorable even to consider. Until he can get out on his own, he'll just have to make do with whatever he can get from the welfare checks someone at the FBI, most likely Bloom herself, applied for on his behalf while he was out of it and in the hospital. It's already more of an advantage than most people in similar or even worse situations are likely to get, so he can't be anything but grateful about that much.

He straightens stiffly as he hears the door to his room being opened, relaxing only minutely when he hears one of the nurses' muffled voices through the bathroom door, "Mr. Graham, visitor for you." Calling out his thanks, he turns the water on just to give himself a few seconds before he has to step out and greet whoever is waiting for him on the other side.

"Will Graham, so good to finally meet you in the flesh," says yet another unfamiliar beta, her words overflowing with an effervescent charm that immediately sets off red flags and puts him on edge. The redhead strides over to him, holding out her hand for Will to take. "Freddie Lounds. I'm a journalist with Tattle-Crime.com. It's a pleasure."

Will stares at her hand like he'd sooner cut off his own than touch it, and very deliberately slides both of them into the front pockets of his jeans instead.

“Not comfortable with physical contact?” she asks, dropping her own hand, her words dripping with condescension and false sympathy for the pitiful little omega she sees. Will says nothing. Better to let her think that’s the reason than tell her it’s because he’s repulsed by her. There are a number of reasons why it’s smarter not to let a tabloid pusher like Lounds know that. “After all you’ve been through, who can blame you? Poor thing,” she continues blithely. Will’s teeth ache from how hard he’s been grinding them together.

“What can I do you for, Ms. Lounds?” he asks, attempting to inject at least a modicum of friendliness in his tone. He could ask her to leave, but he has to admit part of him is curious to see her here, boldly standing in his room as though her presence makes perfect sense in it. He’s curious to know what she’ll say.

“It’s actually what I can do for you,” she replies, sitting now at the foot of his bed without asking. “My readers are curious about you, Will. They want to know more about the brave young man who survived the Tooth Fairy all these years. Oh excuse me, the Great *Red Dragon,* I think that’s what my sources say he was calling himself in his manifesto?” she phrases like it’s a question, obviously fishing for a reaction. Will just keeps looking at her blankly, and she powers on, unfazed by his lack of response.

“You’re like a fairytale to them. A pretty little thing stolen and locked away in a tower, the best-kept secret and most carefully guarded treasure in the Dragon’s hoard,” she says, eyes flashing as if she’s smugly proud of that particular pun. Will clenches his hands tighter in his pockets, unseen, and thinks about how smug her smile would look if he smashed his fist right through her teeth.

“Francis was good at keeping lots of secrets actually,” he points out with a tight-lipped smile.

“True. And of course, we both know the reality of what happened to you isn’t something that can be summed up so simply or neatly either,” she adds, her expression softening into one so surprisingly sincere for a moment that he almost, *almost* wants to believe in it. It’s an interesting brand of ruthlessness made all the more cunning by the glimpses of real humanity she allows to shine through it. If she wasn’t so good at pissing him off already, Will thinks he would find her fascinating.

“So that’s why I’m here,” she says finally, leaning forward where she sits. “I want to tell your side of the story, Will.”

“You want to interview me for an article?” he asks. Before she can answer, the distinctly recognizable sound of someone approaching swiftly down the hall on heels catches both of their attentions, and she quickly gets up from where she was sitting and straightens into a seemingly relaxed but wary stance.

If a knock on the door can sound curt yet carefully controlled so as not to seem *too* demanding, this one would be it. Right away Will knows exactly who it must be even before he calls out for them to come in.

“Hello, Will,” says Alana as she walks in, still managing to be warm and friendly for his sake though he can see the fire burning in her eyes. “And hello, Freddie Lounds,” she adds,

turning to face her. Though she keeps a professional smile on her face, her tone is distinctly cooler as she addresses the other beta woman.

“Doctor Bloom,” says Freddie politely. “I know we haven’t met before, but I’ve heard nothing but good things about you. I see my reputation precedes me as well.”

“It does,” Alana says shortly. “I wish I could say the same about it, Ms. Lounds.” She turns her head to face the omega once more. “Is this woman bothering you, Will?”

Will glances between them both but is saved from the awkwardness of having to reply by Lounds herself. “We were just finishing up here anyway,” she says. She pulls out a business card from her purse and holds it out for Will to take. “Call me whenever you’re ready to talk,” she says. Will accepts it politely and Lounds leaves without another word to either of them.

“I’m so sorry about this, Will,” says Bloom as soon as the door closes behind her and Lounds’ own heels click steadily down the hall. “I don’t know how she found out you were here already, but I’ll put in a word at the front desk not to admit her as a visitor again unless you specifically ask for her.”

Will nods his thanks, curling his hands into fists at his sides, crumpling the card in his hand in the process. *“So good to meet you finally,”* he says through gritted teeth, speaking up for the first time since Alana entered the room. “That’s what she said to me, like she thought I didn’t know...” He sits down heavily on the bed, scowling. “One of the nurses told me what happened and showed me the article, you know the one I’m talking about?”

She nods solemnly. “I saw it. That’s why I was very unhappy to learn she was here when I arrived.”

“It wasn’t the most flattering picture she could have taken of me,” he says wryly. Lounds had snuck in early on the second day of his stay at the hospital, while he was sedated, and snapped a photo of him lying there thin and frail-looking, bandages over the side of his face and neck, a tube sticking out of his arm and one wrist handcuffed to the bed because they weren’t sure yet that he wouldn’t try to attack one of the doctors when he awoke. *“Bride of the Fairy,”* he intones gravely, quoting from the lurid headline of the article in question. He smirks up at her, though the smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “The irony of it is we weren’t even married.”

“Well, one thing no one’s ever accused any story with her name on the byline of is accuracy,” she says, moving closer to the bed and setting down the load of shopping bags she’s been carrying this whole time on the floor.

Will looks down at the bags apprehensively. “What is all that?”

“Clothes,” she answers. “I hope you don’t mind, I wasn’t completely sure about sizes or what style you would prefer, so there’s a lot to choose from. Everything still has its tags so you can return anything that doesn’t fit or that you don’t like, or do whatever you want with it. I, uh, also brought these,” she says, pulling out a stack of gift cards, many of them for iTunes, or Barnes & Noble, or stores he’s either never heard of or never set foot in before.

“I-I can’t,” he says, looking away, swallowing. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do but I’m not...” *Not a charity case,* he thinks, wondering if he can say it without sounding offended or hurting her feelings.

“You need clothes, Will,” she tells him gently. “And really, you’d be doing me a favor by taking these,” she says, setting the cards aside on the bedside table. “I had a whole stack of them I never used at home. People give them to me but I never get around to spending them.” She’s lying, he realizes, and part of him bristles at that, knowing that she’s saying it so he can save face and accept them without being embarrassed. For one heated moment, he thinks childishly about sweeping them up and literally throwing them in her face, but he resists it, a little ashamed of the thought because he knows she’s only trying to be nice.

“So what now?” he asks, knowing he doesn’t sound as grateful as he probably should and hasn’t even thanked her, but he doesn’t amend his tone or correct himself. “Is this the part where we have a long heart-to-heart and you ask me about my *feelings?”*

“Actually, and I don’t like this because I don’t agree with it or think you’re ready for this yet, but...” she sighs. “Jack Crawford has asked to see you. I’m supposed to bring you to Quantico for the interview. I thought it would be better than having him come here,” she adds with a small frown, giving Will the impression that she objects *very* strongly to the idea of the alpha showing up at the place she’s obviously trying to set up as a ‘safe space’ and sanctuary for Will. He doesn’t bother telling her that was already an impossibility even before Freddie made her appearance.

“Alright, let’s go then,” he says and stands, brisk and determined as if to disprove her belief that he’s not ‘ready’ for it. Her eyes seem to linger on the stain on his shirt collar, and she opens her mouth to speak, only to think better of it and let it close gently again.

“You want me to go change first, don’t you,” he says, making it more of a statement than a question.

She shakes her head. “I’m sorry if I seemed...I wasn’t going to suggest it if you didn’t want to. The important thing is that *you’re* comfortable. My opinion and Jack Crawford’s opinion don’t matter.” He analyzes her face carefully and sees that she means it and isn’t just trying to maneuver him into doing what she wants. That’s what makes him decide to pick up the bags and carry them into the bathroom with him.

*

The short-sleeved plaid button-up and blue jeans he picked out are a close enough fit that he suspects she actually checked the tags on his clothes in the hospital room drawer when he was asleep, but if so he doesn’t call her out on it during the drive over.

‘Invasive and overprotective, but well-intentioned’ would be the phrase he would use to describe both Bloom and Crawford, though he keeps that opinion to himself as the three of them sit in Agent Crawford’s office. He can tell by the tight, thin-lipped smile Bloom directs at the alpha, not so dissimilar from the one she directed at Freddie Lounds, that she would likely be more offended by the comparison than anything else, and that alone is enough to

keep him at least mildly entertained as he imagines how that conversation would go in the safety and privacy of his own mind.

“Must be a relief to be out of the hospital finally,” says Crawford. “You’re looking good, Will. I’m glad to see you doing so well.”

“Better than when you saw me last, you mean,” says Will, and he has the distinct satisfaction of getting to see Crawford not *squirm* exactly, but definitely appear more uncomfortable for a moment before the man pushes past it and moves the conversation forward.

“There are some questions I need to ask you,” Crawford explains. “Standard procedure stuff mostly. I understand some of it may be difficult, but I need you to be as honest with me as you can. Doctor Bloom is here to be your stability and support, and of course to kick me in the shin if she thinks I’m overstepping or pushing you too hard,” he says, directing a good-natured smirk in her direction.

“Don’t think I won’t do it either,” she says, smiling as well but with flinty determination in her gaze that tells them she means it.

It goes almost exactly as he expected it would. Most of the question are, in fact, awkward or uncomfortable in some way and he doesn’t want to answer them, but does his best anyway to tell them what he thinks they want to hear, though not *too* much or they’ll suspect that’s what he’s doing. The alpha is inquisitive like a bloodhound, which is probably a good trait for an FBI profiler to have, all things considered. Doctor Bloom carefully chides Crawford more than once for straying into territory she considers too intrusive or not relevant to what the man needs to wrap up the investigation for good. It amuses Will to think of them as two bulls locking horns with one another every time they reach a point of disagreement.

They’re at it with each other again—*politely* and *professionally,* of course—when Will decides to let his attention wander for a bit. He’s already taken inventory of the objects and placement of the furniture within the room as soon as he entered it, so this time he lets himself focus on the few pieces of bland art and plaques on the walls instead. That’s when he notices the bulletin board on the far wall to the right.

He gets up almost without thinking about it to take a closer look, the movement drawing their focus back to him again. “Ah, Will...” Bloom says, awkwardly trailing off as if uncertain how she should finish that sentence.

“Oh hell, I forgot to cover that up,” Crawford tells them apologetically. “I should have done that before you both got here.”

“Yes, you should have,” Alana tells him sharply.

Will ignores them both, staring hard at the board covered with sprawling patterns over a large map and eight smiling faces of sad dead girls. Crawford walks up behind him and places a paternalistic hand on his shoulder that Will is too distracted to shrug off. He says something to try and get Will to come back to where they were sitting, but Will ignores that too.

“He has a daughter,” Will says suddenly, cutting the other man off mid-sentence.

“He...what?” Crawford blinks, glancing back and forth between Will and the board with keen interest now. “What makes you say that?”

“Same hair color, same weight, same age, same pretty, wind-chafed Mall of America looks,” Will lists off for him. “Do I really need to go on? I mean it’s *obvious,* isn’t it?”

“It really wasn’t until just now,” Crawford admits baldly. “What else do you see?”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Alana interrupts, striding over to place her hand on Will’s other arm as if she means to physically tug him away from Jack, though she does no more than let it rest there. Will nonetheless feels like they are no longer bulls but territorial wolves, and he the slab of fresh meat caught between them both. He hunches his shoulders in and withdraws from both of them, Alana looking contritely after him as she lets her hand drop while Jack clears his throat and stuffs his hands into his pockets.

“I think you’ve done enough questioning for one day, seeing as we’re now well off-track from the original reason we came here,” Alana says, steely once again as she addresses Jack. “I’m taking Will back to Port Haven now.”

Jack looks as though he wants to argue with her, but knowing she won’t be swayed, he merely nods in acquiescence instead.

“Thank you both for your time,” he says as he walks with them back to the door to his office. “And Will,” he adds. The young man turns to look at him once more. “I’ll take what you said into consideration,” he says, causing Alana to frown disapprovingly at him, clearly conveying the message of, *‘I know what you’re doing, and don’t even think about it.’*

“She’s leaving home soon,” Will tells him by way of reply. Alana closes her eyes, temporarily defeated. “He can’t stand to lose her.” The boy’s gaze shifts up and actually meets Crawford’s dead on for the first time since they’ve met. “I suggest you catch him before that happens,” he adds darkly.

Jack is skewered by the look. He nods, and it feels like more than a simple agreement, seeming more instead like a tacit promise.

Alana looks as though she wants to wrap herself protectively around the omega’s shoulders, but she refrains from touching him again, and guides him only with a gentle, “Come on, Will,” away from the building and back to her car.

Chapter End Notes

The quote at the very beginning is from the story "Revelation" in Flannery O'Connor's anthology *Everything That Rises Must Converge.*

Amor Carving His Bow

Chapter Notes

> At long last, a new chapter! I still have *all monsters and dust* to finish up, but once that's done I'll finally be able to devote myself more fully to working on this and *Bonfire Night* ~~plus any assorted one-shots I think up or get prompted to write, ha ha, god help me~~.
>
> Title is based on a painting by Parmigianino.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

III. Amor Carving His Bow

"Thank you so much for inviting me over, Hannibal, and for letting me help," she says, carefully mincing the vegetables as he instructed while she speaks.

"You are welcome here anytime, Alana," he says as he finishes arranging the last of the tomato roses. "It is always a pleasure to have a friend for dinner."

She pauses a moment in her chopping to take a sip of her beer. "I forgot how relaxing it is to stand in this kitchen and watch you work. With the week I've been having, I really needed this."

"On the phone, you mentioned a new patient whose therapy has proven to be quite challenging." He looks up at her then and smiles. "Coming from you, I know that is a statement to be taken much more seriously than most. Would you care to discuss it? I could offer you my insights, or simply listen if you would prefer. A friendly ear can go a long way in helping one gain some perspective, especially in our line of work."

She smiles a bit wearily. "Meaning in other words you'll be analyzing me based on how I analyze him?" Hannibal huffs out a short laugh and lifts his hands in a vague *'you caught me'* sort of gesture.

"I apologize in advance if that turns out to be the case. I can no more shut mine off than you can yours, I'm afraid."

She hums thoughtfully, considering his offer. "Alright, colleague to colleague then," she says, knowing she needn't remind him to keep what is said between them in the strictest confidence. "He's an omega, very bright and clearly somewhere on the autistic spectrum, though that's honestly the least fascinating thing so far about his mind."

Hannibal simply raises his eyebrows to show his intrigue, encouraging her to continue. “I believe he suffers from an acute empathy disorder,” she says. “As if that weren’t enough, he’s had to deal with some rather severe emotional trauma and abuse for a number of years.” Hannibal continues to keep his silence, allowing her to go on after a brief pause. “The worst of it is I’m not sure how much I can help him if he won’t let me in. He shuts everyone out and keeps himself very closed off from others.”

“Understandable, given the sort of history I suspect he’s had based on what you’ve told me,” Hannibal speaks up finally. He pauses, showing clear hesitation before he delicately asks, “Alana, would I be correct in assuming we’re talking about the young man who was found in the Red Dragon’s home?”

“Damn, I thought I was being vague enough,” she answers with another tired smile. “What gave it away?”

“My immediate thought after I read that tasteless article was that the FBI would surely wish to assign a therapist to this boy as soon as possible to assess his mental state. I can think of no finer person for the job,” he compliments.

“Well, you may want to hold onto that praise for now and save it for someone else. This ‘fine therapist’ is stumped.”

“I’m sure he’s not the first patient you’ve ever had who has shown some reluctance to accepting your therapy.”

“Maybe not, but there’s something more to it in this case,” she says. “No one but Will knows what life was like for him in that house for the past six years. He won’t talk about it, and all the rest any of us can do is guess. I feel like I’m fumbling around in the dark.”

Here, Hannibal might normally take a more reassuring tack simply out of boredom, perhaps by offering some friendly platitude about how she need only give the boy time and sooner or later he will open up to her as she wants, so they can move on to the next topic of conversation. This time, however, he must admit that his intrigue has not wavered. Indeed, he has been curious about this melancholy-looking creature he saw depicted on the front page of Tattle-Crime, *this Will Graham,* from the moment he learned of his existence. What a fascinating individual he must be to have survived cohabitation with the shy pilgrim for so long and come out of it relatively unscathed.

“The worst is Jack Crawford has taken a keen interest in him now,” she adds with a disapproving frown, piquing Hannibal’s own interest even more.

“Is that not normal for an enforcer of the law to become more personally invested in a victim’s recovery after rescuing them?” he asks, deliberately being obtuse to her meaning so she will elaborate further.

“It is a bit of that I think, but I’m more concerned about his less altruistic reasons.” She sighs. “During the interview at Quantico, Will…said some things about the other investigation.”

“The disappearances in Minnesota,” Hannibal clarifies. Alana nods.

“Jack’s really taken his words to heart. He’s actually changing the course of the entire investigation based on the profile Will gave him.”

Hannibal allows some of his very real surprise at this pronouncement to shine through in his expression. “He must have been extraordinarily convincing when he gave it then, for Jack to take such a risk that could damage his own career if he’s wrong.”

“I don’t think he is wrong,” Alana tells him. Hannibal suspects she has no idea the level of excitement she’s allowing to shine through in her eyes and her voice as she speaks. “He figured out in a matter of minutes what it’s taken a whole team of professionals months to see.”

“You are concerned Jack Crawford will take further advantage of Will’s insights should his assertions prove correct then,” he says, watching with hidden amusement as the fascinated psychiatrist in her fades at these words and the worried therapist comes to the forefront once more. She nods. “Surely there are regulations in place that will prevent him from doing so,” he adds.

Alana’s expression seems skeptical at best. “Justice matters to Jack Crawford far more than protocol ever will,” she says dryly. “He’ll do whatever it takes to get the job done, even if it means making a few shortcuts.”

“Then you will need to keep a sharp eye out should their interactions continue any further,” he says, happily sowing the seeds of further distrust and discord between them.

A dangerous thought enters his mind as their conversation switches gears after that, more a curiosity really. How much might this boy be able to see, he wonders, if they were ever to meet? As he and his guest continue preparing tonight’s dinner, Hannibal begins planning a few arrangements of his own.

*

His first step a few days later is to make a surprise visit to the Port Haven Psychiatric Facility on a day he knows Alana is working there with a basket of dishes on hand, making sure to arrive at least forty minutes before her usual lunch hour.

“I’m sorry, she’s still in session with a patient at the moment,” the receptionist tells him, exactly as he had hoped.

“No matter. I will relish the opportunity to stretch my legs for a bit and take a turn about the grounds while I wait,” he says. “Would it be an imposition to leave this here with you for now?” he asks, proffering the basket in his hand.

“Not at all,” she says, accepting the basket and setting it on the desk beside her. “Wow, smells really good!”

“You are welcome to take a few bites if you wish. It’ll be our little secret,” he tells her with a wink. She giggles and waves him off.

Outside, he enjoys the sights and smells of the meticulously cared for grounds. There are a few patients and nurses out in the garden, none of them the one he hopes to glimpse. Hannibal feels no disappointment in this. If he is unable to orchestrate a chance meeting today, there are always other opportunities and he will still enjoy visiting with his colleague and friend.

He is prepared to accept that this will not be the lucky day and return inside, perhaps taking a circuitous route through the halls to try his search there as well before returning to the reception desk, when he notices a lone figure skipping rocks over the artificial pond further out. Hannibal turns on his heels then and steps out onto the lawn.

*

There is a part of Will that will always feel comforted and more at ease out by the water, no matter what the circumstances. He holds no resentment against the ocean, after all, for taking away his father. That would be beyond foolish, and his dad knew all the risks, knew that he was taking his own life in his hands every time he went out on the boats. Will likes to think he made his peace with his father's passing a long time ago anyway.

What he thinks about instead as he gazes out at the placid surface of the pond are the trips he and his dad used to take when it would become too dull and routine to sit on the pier with their long poles like always. He remembers the quiet companionship of sitting side-by-side in a rented little boat and seeing his own reflection staring up at him from the clear, still surface of the lake, enjoying the sights, smells, and sounds of fresh water and forest instead of salt and sea for once. There were other trips too, ones where they had to put on waders and stand in the middle of a constantly moving stream, casting their lines out long and far into the distance.

The sparkling goldfish and speckled koi of the artificial pond are very pretty but certainly not for fishing. They barely even react as Will skips one small stone over the surface after another, their movements sluggish and slow as though captivity has dulled all of their senses, emptied them of fear or any ability to care. *They're not real fish at all,* he thinks, and furiously hurls another stone, then another, no longer skipping them over the smooth surface but rather trying to hit one of the stupid creatures, hoping to get one of them to dart out of the way, move in another direction, *do something.* He throws until his hands are empty and there are no rocks left around, then seats himself angrily on the ground with his knees drawn up, uncaring about the grass stains that will likely seep into his new jeans.

"I imagine it must be frustrating, don't you?" Will is up again in an instant, spinning around to face the newcomer he hadn't heard approaching.

"What?" he asks, refraining from putting to words the far more pertinent questions. *Who the hell are you? What do you want? How long have you been standing there?*

"To be a fish," the stranger answers. "More specifically, one of those fish," he clarifies, gesturing minutely towards the pond. "Imagine being caught like that, unable to break away from your current surroundings or hide from any onlookers who come to gawk. Especially the ones who choose to throw stones," he adds with an almost imperceptible smile.

Will narrows his eyes at the man. “Another shrink, huh?” he mutters, then scoffs and rubs at the back of his neck with one hand. “At least Doctor Bloom is subtle with her metaphors. Care to lay a few more on me, get them out of your system? No, wait, let me guess,” Will says, gesturing with his hand for the man to halt though he had made no attempt to speak yet.

“Bird in a cage maybe, but no, that’s too cliché and similar to the one you just made about the fish in the pond. You’re better than that, aren’t you? Don’t want to be too boring and predictable right out the gate.” Will taps his chin with his finger as though considering it thoughtfully, taking in everything about the man’s appearance from his three-piece suit and tie to the pretentious fucking pocket square in his jacket. “You know, you strike me as someone who knows more about fine china and fancy tea party etiquette than anyone on this side of the Atlantic has a right to, *so...* maybe something like ‘tiny teacup on a precariously high shelf,’ how’s that one sound? Am I getting warmer at least?”

Curiously, the other man seems neither offended nor put off by Will’s attitude, eyes glimmering with amusement rather than irritation. “Is that how you see yourself, or how you believe others perceive you? A fragile little teacup?”

“Oh, liable to crack at any minute,” Will quips lightly, hands in his pockets, lips pulling into a tight, fierce smile. “Did Bloom send you out here to talk to me, Doctor…?”

“Hannibal Lecter,” the man answers, stepping closer now and extending his hand. The wind picks up a little as he approaches, allowing Will to catch his scent for the first time. The omega straightens his spine automatically, holding his ground and leveling an even steelier gaze at the man than before as he grasps his hand in a firm shake.

“Not too many alphas are permitted on the grounds, Doctor Lecter,” he says without letting go. “They make some of the girls here nervous.”

“But not you, I take it?” Lecter asks. *Not too sympathetic for a psychiatrist,* Will notes and files away for later.

“You don’t scare me, Doctor,” he says with another sharp smile. “You’re also avoiding my question,” he adds, tilting his head curiously. “Now why is that?”

Lecter’s smile widens ever so slightly. “If I were to tell you I was *not* sent by Doctor Bloom to speak with you, Mister Graham, what would you think of me then?” he asks, his grasp tightening minutely around the boy’s hand in what might be taken for a reflexive gesture by anyone else. Will gets the feeling this guy is *trying* to unnerve him now, especially considering he never gave the man his name, and he wonders why that would be. It’s almost as if he’s being tested somehow.

“I’d have to assume you were another onlooker come to gawk then,” he answers simply. “And call me Will.”

“Will,” Lecter corrects himself softly. Hearing his own name pass the man’s lips sends a prickle of unease creeping along the back of his neck, and he tightens his own grip unconsciously as well, before loosening it and pulling his hand away finally. Both hands return to his pockets after that as if to fend off any attempt to take hold of them again.

“I’m afraid I have no sinister ulterior motive to confess,” Lecter tells him, hands now in his jacket pockets to mirror Will’s stance, the perfect picture of charm and ease. He seems harmless as a fly like this, and that more than anything convinces Will that this man is *dangerous.* The only question really is how. “Alana Bloom is a former student of mine. I am simply paying a visit to her place of work, as a colleague and a friend.”

“So naturally you thought the fish pond was the logical place to look for her,” says Will dryly. He takes one step closer, gazing coldly up into the other man’s eyes. “I don’t appreciate being lied to, *Doctor.”*

Lecter blinks once slowly, apparently surprised by the younger man’s reaction. “No, I can see why you wouldn’t,” he responds gently. “It shan’t happen again.” He seems to mean it, though Will obviously can’t be sure.

“Thank you,” he says just as quietly, stepping back again. He turns to face the pond and stares out at the water once more, an obvious dismissal.

Lecter seems about to say more, until one of the nurses steps outside and waves at him from the doorway, clearly trying to get his attention. With a gracious bow of his head, he states simply, “It has been a pleasure to meet you, Will Graham.” Will merely nods without saying anything. Lecter turns on his heel then and leaves.

Will watches him go out of the corner of his eye without making it obvious, wary and curious all at once. This won’t be the last time he sees Lecter, of that he is undoubtedly certain. He tries to tell himself he isn’t excited by the prospect, but who is he kidding? Every day here is so monotonous and routine. Talking with the alpha had provided an interesting diversion, a challenging puzzle to solve. What exactly is it about this guy that makes him so difficult for Will to read? What is it that makes him tick?

This could be a fun way to pass the time, Will decides, already thinking of how he might probe further next time in an attempt to figure the man out. He only hopes it’ll be worth his time and the man doesn’t prove to be just as boring and predictable as everyone else. He has a sneaking suspicion the alpha won’t disappoint.

Only one certainty has arisen out of this so far—there is definitely something about the man he can’t quite put his finger on just yet, and for that reason alone Will Graham finds Hannibal Lecter *very* interesting indeed.

*

How unexpectedly exhilarating that was. He had known from the start that Will Graham must be a truly fascinating individual to pique the FBI’s curiosity so, but he had not expected himself to be so taken in by their conversation that he actually lost track of the time.

Having a much finer appreciation for aesthetics than most, Hannibal’s initial thought upon meeting Will had actually been that the photographs on Tattle-Crime did not do this creature justice. Seeing the boy up close for the first time had been like looking upon Caravaggio’s David come to life, with the addition of those two prominent scars along the side of his face and neck.

Rather than diminish his beauty in any way, those features rather seem to draw it out more, not unlike the way *kintsugi* enhances the beauty of a once-shattered teacup, putting it back together stronger than before and lacing it with threads of gold. Hannibal smiles at the analogy and imagines sharing it with the younger man one day, when he is not so leery of the alpha and seemingly of metaphors in general.

Graham's reaction to Hannibal as an alpha was also quite something. Whereas most omegas would instinctively try to make themselves appear smaller and nonthreatening in an unfamiliar alpha's presence, this boy had stood tall and bordered on nearly defiant if not even a little aggressive. He had expected a chastened lamb and found himself instead looking into the eyes of a fellow wolf.

The urge to discover more and claw deeper into Will Graham's mind tugs at him irresistibly. He knows it would be wiser not to engage any further with the one person he has met in a very long time who seems capable of understanding him and seeing through his person suit, but he cannot bring himself to care, not when he has finally found someone who so readily holds his full attention.

He thinks about this as he eats lunch with Alana, who is already aware of his "accidental" introduction to the omega courtesy of one of the nurses who saw them together, and sees opportunity when she teases that he is really only here to poach one of her patients.

"Now that I've met him, I wonder if it wouldn't do Mister Graham some good to occasionally speak with someone who is not associated with the FBI or this facility."

Her eyes widen a bit in surprise. "You *are* here to steal my patient! I see how it is now." He chuckles lightly, pleased to hear her approach the idea with levity rather than take offense. His argument will be that much more persuasive if she is not suspicious or on the defensive.

"Nothing of the sort, Alana," he assures. "I merely believe he would benefit from having another confidant, one whom he doesn't associate with bad memories or institutional obligation. Officially, he would still be your patient. We would simply be having conversations."

"I don't know, Hannibal," she says, still smiling but clearly reluctant to agree. "I appreciate the offer. It's very thoughtful of you, but even if I were comfortable with imposing on your time like that, I'm not sure it would be the best thing for Will."

"It would be no imposition at all." He leans forward in his chair, schooling his features into a more grave and serious expression. "He is starved for some form of contact with the outside world, Alana. Six years is a long time to be confined to one house and one very unstable individual for company, and to his mind being here can hardly seem like much of an improvement." She frowns thoughtfully at that, acknowledging the truth to his words. "Allowing him to leave here once in a while would go a long way towards building trust between the two of you, and my office would be both a safe environment and a step in the right direction, providing him with an opportunity to see more than these four walls without pushing him too far before he's ready."

And now the final push to knock down what remains of her wavering resolve. “As I am not officially his psychiatrist, he may be more comfortable sharing certain things with me, and since I do not have the same legal obligation as you do to keep everything that is said between us in the strictest confidence, I would be free to share my insights with you if anything he says seems troubling.” Not that he will, of course.

“You’d really be willing to do this? It’s basically taking on an extra patient without the extra pay,” she says, sounding hopeful nonetheless. Good-hearted Alana, always so willing to do whatever it takes to help those under her care. Hannibal is nothing if not good at exploiting the best in people as well as the worst, and using that gift to bring them over to his way of thinking.

“This isn’t about money for me, Alana, any more than I imagine it is for you,” he says, drawing a smile from her. “I believe I can help good Will see past everything that has happened in his life up until now and move beyond it.” Move to where, he can’t say yet, but part of the fun of the journey is not knowing the destination until one has already arrived there. It should be interesting to say the least.

“Will you let me talk to him about it later today and see what he thinks now that he’s met you?” she asks.

“Of course,” he says, standing up to take his leave. He throws her one more disarming smile at the door. “I’ll be waiting by the phone for your call.”

Chapter End Notes

Rewriting the circumstances so Alana is basically playing Jack's role while still remaining in character is so weirdly fun, omg! (Although I don't think doing the reverse would really be possible. D:)

Coming up next chapter: We introduce one more super important character! I'll give you three guesses who. ;)

Saturn Devouring His Children

Chapter Notes

> Fair warning, the first part of this chapter in italics gets pretty f-ed up about halfway through, and is totally skippable if you think it'll make you squeamish. It's nothing that I haven't already tagged or made mention of before, but I thought I should give you a heads-up all the same.
>
> Title (slightly altered) from one of Francisco Goya's most infamous Black Paintings.

IV. Saturn Devouring His Children

Warm familiar hands sliding under his shirt, hot breath against the nape of his neck. Will stirs, blinking sleep away from his eyes blearily in the darkness.

"Frankie?" he mumbles, still tired, so tired. The hands become more insistent, rucking his shirt up over his stomach and chest, a deep growl rumbling from his alpha's throat above him.

One large hand splays out over Will's chest, directly over the beat of his heart. "My robin," the alpha growls, covering the omega's lips with his own before he can respond and forcing his tongue between them, effectively swallowing any words Will might have offered up to him whole. There are no words when it is the Dragon come to take His due.

His alpha always gets like this when he comes home fresh from a hunt, gone his sweet-tempered gentle Francis for at least the next few days after, here only the Dragon hath dominion, and Will is so fortunate, so, so fortunate, *that the Dragon loves him just as much as the man, and that he loves the Dragon in return. How can he not? It was the Dragon who took him first, and the sweet man who came after.*

Will twines his arms around the alpha's back and his legs around the alpha's waist, panting and squirming under all the attention, as the Dragon sucks livid bruises over his neck, laving and nipping over his old claiming bite. Will twists and turns his head to allow him better access.

Mrs. Jacobi and Mrs. Leeds lie in the bed beside him, naked and riddled with deep slashes and harsh aggressive bites, propped up and watching them rut with their bleeding reflective eyes.

Not there, they're not really there, *he reminds himself, squeezing his eyes shut tightly to block them out. He gasps, head thrown back, as the alpha breaches him, kisses turning wetter and*

sloppier and hands gripping him tight enough to bruise as the Dragon slams into him forcefully over and over and over and over…

The Dragon sucks harder over the claiming bite, teeth poised against the old familiar notches as if considering whether or not to tear them open again—like they tore into Mrs. Leeds' left breast—*fingernails trailing burning scratches over Will's sides*—deep, oozing, claw-like lacerations down Mrs. Jacobi's torso—*the hard, thick line of his alpha's cock throbbing inside him*—"Watch carefully during this scene, robin, do you see how she changes? See? Do you see?"

Tears spill hotly down his cheeks but he's not sure if the alpha notices. If so, they only spur the Dragon on. The smell of blood, faint when his alpha first slipped into bed with him, grows steadily stronger now. Will opens his eyes again, blinking away the lingering moisture clouding his vision.

His alpha looks down at him, sweat dripping over his face. Mrs. Leeds and Mrs. Jacobi crouch over the man from behind, hands on his shoulders and back to encourage him to push harder, thrust faster, all the while leering down at Will, blood still squeezing out of their eyes and their mouths and their gaping wounds like thick black ooze—

Will shoots up out of bed fast enough to be dizzy from it, sweat plastering his hair to his forehead and his shirt to his back. He stumbles across the cold wooden floor and makes it to the tiny bathroom just in time, bringing up the contents of his dinner the night before and barely managing to get most of it into the toilet bowl.

Panting, he wipes his lips with the back of his hand and rests his forehead against the back of the lid for a moment, letting the cool porcelain soothe his flushed skin. When his stomach is settled enough and he feels like he can move without shaking, he cleans up the part of the floor where his aim had missed, peels off his damp clothing, and all but throws himself into the shower to let searing hot water scour away every last goosebump and drop of sweat still clinging to him. He won't be getting back to sleep before one of the nurses shows up to tell him to come down for breakfast anyway.

With a soft internal sigh, he remembers that he has a one-on-one session with Doctor Bloom in her office later this afternoon, and then he's supposed to go on a little field trip into town to meet up with the enigmatic Doctor Lecter on his own turf for the first time. He puts in the extra effort to make his mind go blank, to empty it of all images of the troubling dream he just woke from, determined to give them no tools with which they can work to chip away at his thoughts and crack open his skull.

Let there be no one who holds power over Will Graham beyond what he allows them to, no dominion over his mind or his soul save his own.

*

They're in the middle of their session, making the usual amount of progress—dismal, that is to say—when Doctor Bloom gets the call. Will rather unsubtly breathes out a sigh of relief when the receptionist interrupts to let her know, grateful to have a break from Bloom's well-

meant coaxing to try to get him to speak and having to give vague answers in reply just to be polite.

“I’m so sorry, you know I wouldn’t normally barge in like this,” the beta girl—Grace, he thinks that’s her name—says as she tentatively walks in, one hand still curved around the doorknob. “But there’s a Jack Crawford on the line and he says it’s urgent. I tried to tell him you were in a session and, well…” she trails off, eyes straying to look over at Will now with a puzzled expression. “Well, he asked if it was with Mr. Graham and said it would be fine to interrupt if it was, because he apparently wants to talk to you both anyway. Was…was that wrong?” she asks uncertainly, noticing the now hardened expression on Alana’s face.

“No, it’s fine, Grace. You were right to come in with this.” Will can tell that she doesn’t really mean it and is just saying that to be reassuring, her ire being with the alpha who called and not the messenger. Will, on the other hand, feels a curious tingle of excitement mixed with mild trepidation.

He’s found her, Will thinks. *He’s found the daughter.* Where the daughter is, the father will be as well; Will is apprehensive about what that could mean and anxious suddenly to find out.

“I’ll take the call in here. That’ll be all, Grace, thank you.” The receptionist nods and leaves the room, shutting the door softly behind her. Bloom goes around to her desk then, and with an apologetic smile at Will, picks up the receiver. “Hello, Jack,” she answers stiffly.

“Put it on speaker,” Will interjects. He can just barely make out Crawford’s gruff voice rumbling on the other end of the line at the same time, and guesses by the exasperated look she shoots across the room at him that he must have said something similar. Heaving a heavy sigh, she does as asked and hangs the receiver back on the hook.

“Alright, you’re on speaker now, Jack. Just please be mindful of what you say,” she tells him, and for one brief flash of an instant, Will hates her for it. He doesn’t need to be coddled, he needs to know what happened.

Jack clears his throat, the sound of it surprisingly clear and echoing in the silence of Bloom’s office. *“I just wanted to let you both know that we got the Shrike. A construction worker named Garrett Jacob Hobbs. And that you were right, Will. He had a daughter, Abigail.”*

“Had?” Will asks, voice sharp.

“She’s fine,” Jack reassures, and Will feels the tensed strain of his muscles relax. Strange, to have such a visceral reaction over a girl he’s never even met or seen. It’s been a long time since Will has felt so much toward anyone, aside from his jumbled-up feelings for Francis. *“Suffered a laceration to the neck, but we had paramedics on the scene who patched her right up, so she’s stable now. The hospital wants to keep her under observation for a few days and I’ll need her still for questioning, but after that I’m sending her your way, Doctor Bloom.”*

“Thank you, Jack. It was good of you to call with this,” she tells him diplomatically.

“What about Hobbs?” Will asks, and Alana frowns disapprovingly down at her desk, as though Will were a delicate flower who would wilt it if she were to aim it at him directly.

“I’m sure there’s a lot Agent Crawford can’t disclose to the public yet, Will,” she says.

“No, no, it’s fine, Alana. It’ll be all over the news soon enough, and I trust Will with this information,” Jack says. Bloom’s mouth appears to thin even further if that were possible. Will wonders privately if every FBI-referred patient turns into the battleground for a power struggle between Bloom and Crawford or if he’s just special. Perhaps he should warn Abigail Hobbs when she arrives to expect the same treatment. *“Garrett Jacob Hobbs is dead,”* Crawford announces gravely. Will stills.

“Is this standard procedure for you, Agent Crawford?” he asks with some bite. “Too much work to bring them in in cuffs, so you come down on them dealing judgment the Old Testament way instead?” Bloom closes her eyes solemnly, but Will thinks maybe some small part of her is secretly gleeful that Crawford would make such a huge misstep where Will is concerned.

There is a clicking sound on the other end of the line, as if Crawford has started to speak only to stop himself, carefully reconsidering his words. *“It is when a hostage’s life is on the line,”* he answers finally. *“I tried disabling him first, Will. When that didn’t work, and he still kept trying to drag the knife across his own daughter’s throat, yes, I reacted. Would you have done differently?”*

“Jack!” Bloom chastises, indignant and shocked.

“No,” Will lies. Well, half-lies. Will tries to reconstruct the situation in his mind and put himself in Crawford’s shoes—he thinks once he started pulling the trigger, he would not have stopped until the clip was empty, just to be sure.

Jack clears his throat again. *“I’m sorry, Will. That was unworthy of me.”*

Will shrugs, knowing Crawford can’t see it. “I like that you’re honest, at least,” he says.

Crawford sighs. *“Anyway, I just wanted you to know.”* There is a pause, and then he adds, *“A lot more lives could have been lost if we didn’t catch this guy when we did. We wouldn’t have gotten this far without you, Will.”*

“Does that mean the FBI will cut me a check?” Will quips. “Kidding,” he adds quickly before Crawford can try to answer. “I’m…happy to help.”

“Alright, Jack, Will and I really need to get back to our session,” Bloom pipes up again, almost as if this conversation couldn’t be over soon enough for her liking. “You and I will talk more about this later,” she says, and Will senses another scathing lecture in Jack Crawford’s future.

Crawford agrees and finally ends the call. Will sinks back into his chair, resigned to finishing out the hour as Bloom wants and counting the minutes until it’s over. One session down,

another still to go, and then this day will finally be over. At least he will have new thoughts to turn over in his head for the evening when everyone finally leaves him alone.

*

Rarely is anyone who enters Hannibal's office bold enough to ask if they may climb the ladder and peruse the bookshelves upstairs, though Hannibal has no objections to allowing anyone access so long as they remain courteous and considerate of his things. The books up there, while some of his favorites, are no more valuable than the ones on the shelves below, and the notes he keeps on his patients upstairs are all coded.

Will's request barely borders on polite, one foot already on the bottom rung and both hands grasping another before he thinks to tilt his head in Hannibal's direction and raise a single questioning brow, yet Hannibal is unwilling to deny the youth and finds himself vaguely charmed that Will bothers even that much at all. As he watches the omega climb, he muses over the conflicting drives of deliberate insolence and respectful deference that seem to inform the boy's choices, wondering if there is a pattern to which one will usually win out and in what measure.

"I have to tell you, Doctor Lecter, I'm beginning to feel *a lot more* like that goldfish who can't get out of the pond. It's like you're all waiting to see whose hook will snare in my lip first so you can reel me up and take a peek under my gills." Hannibal smiles, for Will's sharp assessment paints a vivid image and poses within it a double-edged meaning that cannot be ignored.

"I would apologize for my analytical ambush the other day, but I know I will soon be apologizing again and you'll tire of that eventually, so I have to consider using apologies sparingly." Gazing up at the young man whose own attention has not strayed from the contents of his shelves, he continues, "I must also take into consideration your own expressed distaste for dishonesty."

Will does turn around to look down upon him finally, resting his arms casually over the rail with a wide smirk. "Sorry, not really sorry at all?" he asks in a wry tone.

"Precisely so," Hannibal agrees openly, reflecting his own smile back up at Will.

"You want to study me, dissect me and open me up to see what you can find inside."

"What is it you fear will be found if someone peeks behind the curtain too closely?"

"Really, going in for the kill right in the first sesh, Doc?" Will shakes his head in mock disappointment. "I can't tell if that's a sloppy move or a brilliant one. Does it work on all your other patients?"

"You would have to ask one of them," Hannibal replies. "And you are not one of my patients, Will. Doctor Bloom is your psychiatrist, not I. You and I are merely having conversations."

"Right, *conversations,"* Will says, putting the last word in air quotes. "Which, conveniently, means you can tell Bloom as much as you want about whatever I say," he adds, meandering

over to the ladder again now to head back down.

“Perhaps,” Hannibal allows, coming to stand directly below to hold the ladder steady for Will’s descent. “But convenient for whom?”

Low enough now to be of a height with the older man, Will twists his head and shoots him a look over his shoulder. Hannibal offers a hand to help him down the rest of the way. After directing a narrow-eyed, considering frown down at that hand for a moment, Will accepts it and hops down from the second-to-last rung, Hannibal’s other hand hovering just near enough to offer steady support to his back should he need it before falling away and releasing him entirely.

From this close, Hannibal can see the hint of shadowy bags under Will’s eyes, mostly obscured by his glasses when far enough away, and smell the faintest traces of worn nerves and the generic shampoo Will used to wash his hair this morning. Underneath that is the spicy-sweet scent of Will himself, and Hannibal is struck suddenly by the need to make his breaths shallower in order to resist the urge to sniff more openly and deeply.

He turns his own reaction over in his mind as he steps away, ostensibly to allow Will his own space, setting it aside as something that warrants further study later. “A well-rested mind is a healthy one,” he says as he makes his way to his chair. “Are you getting enough rest, Will?”

The tense-set of Will’s shoulders before he visibly forces them to relax lets Hannibal know he has struck one of those nerves with his probing question. “I manage,” he answers in a tone close enough to casual that it should be applauded. Hannibal decides he will not probe beyond it today, not wishing to push Will too far too soon. “How well do you sleep, Doctor Lecter?” he asks, turning the question back on his pursuer as he sits finally in the chair across from him.

“As peacefully as the lamb before the slaughter,” he answers, enjoying the view as he watches Will internalize that statement, etch it into his mind so he can look at it from multiple angles and try to suss out its meaning.

“So what should we talk about?” Will asks finally, leaning back in his chair, one hand on each of the armrests and an ankle perched on the opposite knee, whether in deliberate or unconscious mirroring of Hannibal’s own relaxed position the alpha can’t yet determine.

“Whatever you like,” Hannibal says. “We can keep it simple if that’s what you’d prefer. How was your day?” he asks with a thin smile.

“How was my day?” Will repeats, leaning forward, an eyebrow raised and a smirk on his lips. “It was…interesting.” He considers for a moment, and then decides to tell him about the conversation with Bloom and Crawford about Abigail Hobbs and her father.

“I have yet to meet Jack Crawford myself in person, but from what I understand, he is not a man who generally sees his own actions as beholden to another’s opinion. That he would choose to defend them here, and even apologized to you afterwards, speaks volumes to me about the impression you must have made.”

Will appears surprised, as if he had not thought to look at it that way, or had not considered that Hannibal would choose to steer their conversation in this direction. After a few seconds of silence, he says, “Sitting between the two of them—Bloom and Crawford, I mean—it feels sometimes like being the kid at the center of a custody dispute after an ugly divorce.”

“They each see you as something fragile, delicate, to be protected at all costs, but disagree as to the manner in which it should be done. Alana Bloom chooses to nurture, and hovers, as any new mother might do,” says Hannibal. “Jack Crawford sees in you the potential to pass down his own legacy, a flowering young mind to soak up any wisdom he might wish to impart.”

A vein appears to twitch almost imperceptibly in Will’s jaw. “I’ve spent my whole life without a mother and gotten along without her just fine,” he says. “And I couldn’t ask for a better dad than the one who raised me, so...” He slouches back in his seat again. “They can take those fuzzy paternal feelings and foist them onto someone else, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Feelings of any nature are always a tricky subject,” Hannibal replies. “Your mother is absent. Your father is dead.” Here he pauses, briefly, and seeing no visible reaction, either because Will doesn’t have one or because he hides it very well, moves on. “In this, Alana and Jack view those roles as vacant, and whether it is in their conscious intent or not, they seek to fill those roles themselves in your parents’ perceived absence.”

“And what role are you trying to fill exactly?” Will snaps.

Hannibal blinks, not expecting to have the question pointed back on him so suddenly. What role does he wish to fulfill in Will’s life? He has not decided upon an adequate answer to that for himself just yet, still teasing the boundaries of it in carefully measured increments. But Will needs an answer now, so Hannibal must give him the most accurate and sincere one he can find within himself in this critical moment between them.

“I wish to be your friend,” he says.

It is Will’s turn to blink, as though not quite sure what to do with that information. He does not question Hannibal’s veracity, merely seems blankly perplexed by it.

“Well, we’ll see about that,” he says finally, answer almost petulant as if he had hoped Hannibal would give him some reason to doubt or mistrust.

The alpha smiles, feeling strangely victorious. Every word exchanged between them seems to present its own unique challenge, one which both of them must overcome without misstep in order to peel away the next layer and figure out what the other is trying to hide. It is quite possibly the most fun and intellectually stimulating game Hannibal has participated in in a very long time.

And he has many more conversations with Will Graham to look forward to in the days to come.

*

In the hospital there is a girl, a pretty, wind-chafed omega with clear blue eyes and freckled skin. For the moment, she sleeps, and in sleeping can forget for awhile that when she wakes she will still be an orphan, still be the daughter of a now deceased alpha who used to kill pretty, wind-chafed omegas that looked just like her, still be a girl who remembers the taste of her breakfast that morning before everything went to hell—eggs and orange juice and sausages that were neither venison nor pork.

There are no handcuffs to encircle her wrists and keep her chained to the bedframe, and when she wakes she will think that perhaps there should be. That if the people here were smart, perhaps there would be.

A red-haired woman will try to find a way to gain visitation access to her room, and be summarily rejected. The hospital staff knows her face. Their security personnel have posted pictures of her at every receptionist desk on every floor to make sure of it after what happened at that other hospital the last time. The FBI agent who escorted the girl's ambulance here gave them that picture. The same mistake will not be made in this facility. The girl is lucky in that much, at least.

Asleep, her dreams are colored by the light of the morning sun filtered through autumn foliage. It is a good memory she dreams about, one of her first hunting trips with her father, but already there is an uneasy tinge to it now that she doesn't remember from back then, knowledge she did not have at the time painting the shadows under her father's eyes darker, the proud wistful looks he gives her sadder. Her father is already thinking ahead to a time when he will not have this anymore, and in that moment she wants to hug him and call him Daddy like she used to and reassure her father that she will never leave his side, but in that moment she is also afraid of him.

The dream changes. They are in the cabin now and her father is showing her how to skin the deer she shot. She tries to protest and something in him almost seems to lash out, before he collects himself, hand curved around hers curved around the handle of the knife currently sunk into the animal's gut. And he looks into her eyes and says, "We must honor every part of her, or else it's just murder. Do you understand?"

In the too-bright light of the too-white walls of the hospital room, Abigail Hobbs sits upright too fast in bed, her long, tangled hair askew and eyes popped open wide.

Apollo and Diana

Chapter Notes

In which the author seems to forget temporarily that he is not, in fact, writing a *Girl, Interrupted* AU with Abigail as Winona Ryder and Will as Angelina Jolie. At least that's kinda the vibe they were giving me this chapter. xD

Title inspired by painting of same name by Lucas Cranach the Elder.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

V. Apollo and Diana

It's barely been a few hours since she got settled in, but already Abigail hates it here.

She hates the hospital bed they expect her to sleep in, in the room they call "hers" even though it's nothing like her bedroom back home and never will be. She hates the looks the nurses give her, pitying on some and wary on others, like they don't know what to make of her yet but are on the lookout for signs that she'll be a troublemaker for them. Abigail has always been the good girl, the obedient daughter and the serious honor roll student, so she has never been on the receiving end of that look before and wants to be offended by it. She would be offended by it, if a little voice didn't whisper in her head that maybe the look is warranted.

Above all else, she thinks she probably hates most of the other omegas here, and *that* makes her feel a bit guilty. She knows she shouldn't, knows that they're here for reasons that, once boiled down, likely aren't all that different from hers, knows that they can't *help* the way they seem to broadcast their victimhood for everyone to see, but still she can't help the way she has to hold back the little grimace her face wants to make when the girl sitting next to her keeps going on and on in her little babyish voice that wouldn't sound out of place if she heard it at a kiddie table surrounded by dolls with plastic, floral-patterned cups of fake tea.

Unfortunately, she has to sit through it and listen, since her first day here happens to coincide with the day for weekly mandatory group sessions. They've only just started, but already she knows for the rest of her stay that she's going to hate group most of all.

Only one thing makes up for it really, even if it's only a little bit. Not a *thing* actually. A person. Another person sitting directly across from her in their sad little circle, one who obviously doesn't feel like he belongs there any more than Abigail does. One who casts surreptitious glances at her now and then but tries politely not to stare, which is fair since she's been doing the same thing right back at him this whole time. She probably started it actually, now that she thinks about it, though she can't really be sure. She didn't really expect

him to know who she is, though she supposes the scarf carefully covering up the stitches along the side of her neck kind of gives it away.

She knows exactly who he is, of course. Recognizes him from the news and pictures on the internet. The last thing she ever expected since her world was rendered upside down was that she would end up in the same omega hospital as Will Graham. If she's being honest, it's because she never expected someone like him to end up in a place like this, no more than she expected herself to end up here. There's something almost reassuring about that, at least.

*

He knows exactly who she is the moment she takes the empty chair across from him at group, of course. Difficult to miss, even if he hasn't seen any photos of her directly—she looks so much like the girls on Crawford's bulletin board that it would be uncanny if he didn't know that's how her father was picking them.

And what kind of special hell she must be in, he thinks, to start her first day here and already have to sit through her first round of introductions in *fucking group.* If there's anything he hates here more than group, he's been fortunate enough not to have come across it yet. What's worse, he can't exactly warn her that their group leader Martha is saving her turn for last because she's new, or that they're going to tell her she has to introduce herself and share a little *because* it's her first session. It's the only time they're not given a choice; they can sit in silence and just listen during every session thereafter if they want, as Will does, but they *have* to sit through every session and they *have* to speak up during their first meeting.

In theory, it's a nice way to ensure everyone has to overcome any shyness or reticence they may feel to open up at least once. In practice, he thinks it's a real shitty way to introduce anyone to the concept, shittier still that they have to keep going every week even if they never feel like talking again, and a small wonder to him that anyone participates willingly at all after that first time, even less so with the combination of relish and relief that some of them seem to feel as they spill about their secrets and the things that have happened to them in front of a captive audience. Group therapy, Will decides, is simply not meant for everyone. Try telling that to the administration at Port Haven though. Will has yet to convince Doctor Bloom that he really doesn't need to be a part of this, and only succeeds in earning yet another "disappointed mom look" each week every time Martha reports his continued silence back to her.

He shifts almost unconsciously in his seat as Nina wraps up and the buck passes to Abigail next. Her eyes widen almost imperceptibly when Martha tells her to introduce herself and state why she's here, but past that and a tiny swallow mostly hidden by the scarf around her throat, she handles it admirably well.

"My name is Abigail," she says, softly but clearly. "I'm here because my dad killed omegan girls that looked just like me."

*

"And how does that make you feel, Abigail?" the nurse presses gently. Abigail wants to scoff because *really,* that's the question they want her to answer right out of the gate? What a

fucking cliché.

“Not good,” she answers tightly, aware that her lips want to pull into a sharp smile that could puncture glass and willing them as best as she can not to. Peripherally, because she can’t help but continue to be aware of him at the edge of her vision, she notices that Will Graham’s fingers have curled just a fraction tighter around the edge of his own plastic chair. She doesn’t look in his direction to see if he’s wearing the smile that she tries to hide, but it’s a very near thing. It feels vindicating.

“Were you and your dad doing it?” another girl asks, snide and practically leering at her. Abigail turns in her seat to face her, mouth slightly agape in shock, too stunned to say anything in reply.

“Now, Cassie,” says the nurse in a chiding schoolmarm tone.

“Bet you were daddy’s perfect little girl, weren’t you?” Cassie continues, blithely ignoring the nurse’s weak cautioning reprimand.

“You’ll have to excuse Cassandra.” Abigail’s eyes snap to Will, a tiny smirk now playing on his lips. This is the first she’s heard him speak since they started. “She thinks about fucking her brother all day long and assumes everyone else’s fantasies are just as pedestrianly Freudian as hers.”

“Will!” the nurse admonishes much more sharply. The girl, Cassandra, stands at the same time, pushing her chair back with a loud scrape.

“I-I do not!” she says, face blotchy and red. “Who the fuck told you I—it-it’s not true! Why don’t you come say that to my face, *you ugly, scar-faced bitch?”* she yells, her flustered attitude shifting quickly into anger instead.

Will merely looks up at her from where he sits with a single raised brow and doesn’t say anything else. A couple of the other girls start rocking in their seats or crying softly at all the noise she’s making, and one of them clamps her hands over her ears and starts shouting wordlessly, which agitates the rest that are already upset and sets them off even worse.

“Girls, *girls, please,”* the nurse says as she now stands as well, walking over to Cassie to try to calm her down while also attempting to figure out how to soothe the others at the same time, clearly overwhelmed and not at all up to task.

Abigail keeps her attention fixed on Will the whole time, and after a long moment of quietly, almost *blandly,* seeming to watch the scene unfold before them, he turns his head to face her directly. The barely-there smirk returns for only a second, and then with an equally blink-and-you-miss-it wink in her direction, he stands and walks calmly out of the room while the nurse’s back is turned.

Abigail follows his lead, careful not to jump out of her seat too eagerly and draw attention to herself as more nurses start to file in to help.

She doesn't call out his name, just follows from a few paces behind, nearly bumping into him when she rounds the next corner only to find him slouched back against the wall in an empty hallway, glasses off as he rubs his eyes wearily with one hand. It's such a different attitude from the cool, easy vibe he seemed to project only a minute ago that she lowers her gaze, embarrassed that she might have seen something she wasn't meant to and not sure whether to act like she did or not.

"Hey." She looks up to find him smiling at her again, this time kindly and with still a touch of that weariness, and feels herself smiling almost unconsciously back. His eyes don't quite meet hers, but they come close, landing somewhere roughly near her ear, so she counts that as good enough.

"Hey," she says back. "So…I know you might get in trouble for it later, or whatever, but what you just did back there was *fucking awesome."* Here, he lets out a snort of laughter and smiles wider. She grins victoriously in return. "So yeah, I just wanted to say that, and you know, say thanks."

He shrugs lightly. "No problem," he says, wiping the lenses of his glasses on his shirt before sliding them back on.

She wonders for a minute if that's all he's going to say, and fidgets nervously as she considers whether she should just leave now. She doesn't particularly want to go back to her own room, and she *can't* go back to face all those other people again right now, but she doesn't want to overstay her welcome around the closest person she's made to a friend either.

"She shouldn't have said what she did," he says so quietly after a moment that she almost doesn't catch it.

"I should probably get used to it," she replies, smile wavering a bit now. She shifts her stance to lean against the wall beside him, now that she's confident enough he's not going to tell her to buzz off and give him some space. "I'm sure she won't be the last to say stuff like that and worse."

"You don't deserve it," he says with such calm conviction, she doesn't even question it the way she does with everyone else. "Neither does your father for that matter. He had his issues, but everything he did was because he *loved* you. He would *never* have done something like...like *that."*

Her breath stills in her throat, and she worries for a second that she's going to start crying before she gets herself under control. "I-I know what you just said is true," she says softly once she has a rein on her emotions, "but I'm wondering how *you* know that, exactly."

He sighs, and runs a hand over his face again. "It's this thing I can do. I can empathize with anyone. And look," he says, now the one clearing his throat and fidgeting nervously. "There's something else you should know, before anyone else tells you about it." He forces himself to look her directly in the eye before he continues. "I'm the reason the FBI knew how to find you. The reason they tracked down your dad was because I told them the guy they were looking for had a daughter."

This...this is not something she expected. Before she is consciously aware of it, her knees are bent as she slides slowly and carefully down the wall to sit on the floor against it. Beside her, Will follows suit in the same stilted motion, as if he can't help but mimic her body language. She supposes with what he just said, that's true.

She turns her head to look at him and finds him pointedly *not* looking at her, staring down and ahead at the patch of carpet between their shoes instead. She wonders suddenly if he blames himself for her parents dying. The only person *she* blames is the agent who shot her father. And yes, she blames her father too for cutting her mother's throat like he was going to cut hers before Crawford shot him. She does *not,* however, blame Will simply for noticing what apparently no one else had, and is trying to come up with a way to tell him that while still dealing with the emotional fallout of the loss she's been reminded of again now, which has not gone away no matter how she tries to push it down or ignore it.

"How did you figure it out?" she asks to buy herself some time.

"I just looked at the evidence," he says. He half-shrugs and grimaces, realizing how much that sounds like a brush-off. "It's weird to try and explain, but that's really all there is to it. I looked." He turns his head, finally able to meet her gaze with his own again. "I looked, and I saw you."

Abigail feels whatever words she might have tried to say get stuck in her throat. Her vision blurs. That's twice she's come close to tears already in the same conversation, but she blinks them back again before they can try to escape.

Will sits up uncomfortably, one elbow pushed against the carpet to support himself, and she realizes that he thinks he's upset her and is about to get up and leave. She doesn't want that, and so blurts out the first thing that comes to mind.

"I saw you too!" He pauses in motion, lowering himself back slowly to the ground after a still half-second and looking at her with a puzzled pull to his brows.

"Not during, um, not while your mate was still killing people," she says, embarrassed now for letting her panicked brain do the talking and not running her words through some kind of filter first. "After, I mean. When that article about you came out."

"Ah," he says, understanding drawing a wry smile to his lips. "Yeah, it generated quite a lot of buzz from what I hear," he adds dryly.

She tugs on a strand of her hair and sighs, frustrated that she's not making herself clear and is possibly only making things worse. "Look, I know most of what it said is just conjecture and bullshit. It's not the article that's important, it's…" She bites her lip, annoyed for digging herself into a hole, because now it means she has to admit to something that she probably should have just kept to herself. "I kept the picture, alright?" she huffs, defensive. "I printed it out at the school library and tucked it into the pages of my Biology notebook."

After a brief silence in which Will apparently has nothing to respond with, she snorts loudly and shakes her head. "God, now that I've said it aloud, it sounds creepy as hell." She chances a look at him and is relieved to see him valiantly trying to hold back an amused smirk. "I

know what else it sounds like too, but believe me, it wasn't for the usual reason teen girls like to clip pictures of boys out of magazines either."

The smile breaks free completely now, accompanied by mostly silent laughter she can nonetheless detect hints of in his voice when he assures her, "I know it's not. I believe you." He presses a hand dramatically over his heart and says, "I don't know if my poor self-esteem can take the hit though."

"Ugh, shut up. You'll live," she says, grinning. "I guess that's kind of the point I was making really," she continues, smile still present but smaller now as her tone turns serious once again. "You'll live. *You lived.* In spite of everything that happened, everything that you had to…" She trails off, clearing her throat. Both of them look away from each other and stare vaguely ahead at the wall, thoughts on each of their respective *'had-tos.'*

"It was starting to get really bad at home, you know, right there at the end, in those last few weeks leading up to it," she continues quietly, voice almost a whisper. "It was getting harder and harder to convince myself that-*that I wasn't going to die,"* she forces herself to say louder, voice harsher and almost clipped as she pushes the words out. She glances over at Will again, says, "So yeah, maybe it's silly, or weird, or whatever, but keeping a reminder around that someone else out there *had survived,* after going through something similar to what I was dealing with, or maybe worse," here Will swallows, turning his head away briefly. "It helped when nothing else did," she finishes.

After another beat, however, she decides to add, "Gotta be honest though, I didn't expect it to suck this much." That earns another amused snort from him.

"To tell you the truth," he says, leaning sideways to whisper conspiratorially to her, *"me neither."* Both of them share wry smirks over that, as though it were a casual admission over something simple like not liking coffee. "But here we are. We walked through the flames and made it out on the other side, while everything else behind us burned away."

"We're gonna be fucked up for the rest of our lives, aren't we?" she asks.

"Oh, most definitely," Will answers.

They look at each other again, and this time neither of them can hold it in, both of them clutching their sides as they double over breathlessly in laughter, brushing shoulders as they lean on one another for support. This is how Martha finds them shortly afterward, hands on her hips and expression stern, which only leads to them laughing all the harder, even as she directs them both to go see Bloom like a pair of unruly kids getting sent to the principal's office for ditching class.

Each of them thinks the same thing as they walk down the corridor together, the nurse following closely behind as if they can't be trusted to go where she instructed on their own—that at least one good thing came out of going to group today.

Chapter End Notes

I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

No Movement, No Object

Chapter Notes

> This chapter fought me tooth and nail. Like, named it for the last two lines of Ad Reinhardt's Twelve Rules, *that's* how hard this thing fought me. It was either post what I have now to get over the hurdle, or make you guys wait another month for an update. I think we can all agree I chose wisely. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VI. No Movement, No Object

From that day forward, Will and Abigail are nearly inseparable. They sit together at meals and hang out in the rec room or the gardens during the day. The only times they're really apart aside from lights out is when one or both of them decides they need some downtime to be on their own; both of them are introverted enough that they often require space from other people to relax and recharge, even occasional space from each other.

Alana tells Hannibal all of this during their next informal chat about Will's progress, concern clearly etched on her features. While she's glad on the one hand that both of her patients seem happier and healthier for having one another as a confidant and ally, she worries about the risks of co-dependency. Neither of them makes any effort to socialize with the other omegas at all, and their progress in therapy is still stagnant at best.

"I'm reluctant to take any steps towards forced separation, however," she admits with a gentle frown.

"Indeed. You would be setting yourself up as the antagonist if you tried," Lecter tells her. "Which would foster more co-dependency, not less. Us vs. them." The corners of his own lips quirk downward into a moue of displeasure. It is not wholeheartedly an act. He *is* displeased.

"Exactly," Bloom agrees. "I'm kind of stuck at the moment between a rock and a hard place."

As she sips at her beer and carries their conversation on to their mutual love of the arts and other less work-oriented territory, Hannibal diverts what small amount of attention he can politely spare without notice to self-reflection upon his own reaction to the news she has brought him.

It is only natural, he decides, that he would experience some annoyance at the thought of this Hobbs girl slotting herself so neatly at Will's side with hardly any effort on her part while Hannibal himself must still be so careful as to how he chips away at the young man's defenses in order to earn his status as a confidant of equal importance. Most frustrating of all,

if they are truly as close already as his colleague claims, it hedges in his options for how to proceed. It is immediately apparent that if he is to succeed in gaining Will's trust, he must either win over Miss Hobbs to his side as well, or devise a way to eliminate her altogether.

In his mind's eye he can picture it clearly—a clean slice along her throat, in the kitchen in her old house, just as her father had tried to do. It would be poetic, neat, her life and death come full circle.

It is entirely too satisfying to imagine, so much so that Hannibal puts the thought away to analyze more deeply after Alana leaves, and diverts his attention back to being the gracious host for the rest of the evening.

He returns to the thought once Bloom is gone, his sleeves rolled up neatly to his elbows as he scrubs each platter and dish from their meal meticulously by hand. Again, he enjoys it far more than he would expect. He has not met this girl, knows nothing about her beyond what little information Bloom has provided, yet his every impulse screams at him to get rid of this distraction that has entered Will's life without his permission as quickly as possible. While Hannibal feels no guilt and generally very little desire to ignore his own whims, it is disconcerting in this instance to feel so strongly about the issue, so *alpha* in his reaction.

I am jealous, he understands suddenly with perfect clarity. How utterly peculiar. Who is Will Graham to him, that he should feel this way?

He must not be hasty in this decision merely because of some showy, primal instinct. He will wait until he has spoken with Will again and met Abigail Hobbs for himself, in order to gauge whether she is truly a hindrance to his goals or of some possible use instead.

*

"Tell me about Abigail Hobbs."

Will huffs out a cynical laugh. "Bloom got to you already, huh?" When all Lecter responds with is a curious tilt of his head, Will continues. "She thinks we're a bad influence on each other," he says, leaning forward in his seat, a tiny smirk playing on his lips as though it were some conspiratorial secret, "but she doesn't quite want to say as much. She asking you to play bad cop now in her stead?"

"Not in so many words," Lecter responds with the barest hint of a smile himself. "You know our dear Doctor Bloom. She would never be so gauche as to make the request directly."

"Ain't that the truth," Will mutters with a roll of his eyes. He settles back against his chair again. "First I don't socialize enough, now I socialize too much, but I'm what? Too picky about who I make nice with? If she thinks either Abigail or I are the types to start linking hands with all the other sad little omegas and sing Kumbaya, she's fucking delusional."

He has never cursed in front of Lecter before. The man certainly cultivates the appearance of someone fastidious enough about language to take offense to profanity, especially when it is pointed deliberately at punctuating an insult against a supposed friend. Will constructs his statement this way simply to see if he can get the man to twinge.

The reaction he gets is far better than what he expected. The man actually *laughs,* a singular, sharp, half-surprised sound as if he no more expected it than Will had. Will's own face goes blank as he processes this unforeseen outcome, then stays that way even as his ears start to burn red, resisting the urge to squirm or smile, astonishingly pleased with himself. This is not the reaction he was going for, but he'll take it.

The only evidence of Lecter's amusement by the time Will gets a grip on his own reaction to it is a faint smile, ever so slightly wider than the usual microexpression he wears. "Ever the optimist though Alana Bloom may be, never before have I heard anyone posit that it may be the result of delusions." Will is only mildly disappointed that he didn't call them *'fucking'* delusions. Perhaps his next goal should be to determine under what circumstances he can push the man into swearing himself.

"Bit much?" Will asks cheekily. "Fine, not delusional then, just…naively hopeful." He slouches further back in his seat. "What do you think?"

"About you and Abigail Hobbs, or about Alana Bloom's hopeful delusions?" Will shrugs as if to say, *both, either, it doesn't matter.* "I think it would be a touch unfair of me to make a snap judgment regarding an individual I have not had the pleasure of meeting yet, wouldn't you agree?"

It is Will's turn to laugh sharply at that. "Now *that's* how you make a subtle, not-so-subtle suggestion," he says. Their smiles match as they gaze at one another across the short distance between their chairs. "I'm surprised you didn't already spring that idea on Bloom first," he adds, his look one of shrewdness now to subtly, not-so-subtly suggest he knows exactly whose idea it was he attend these sessions with Hannibal in the first place.

"I considered it. I am, however, far more interested in your feelings on the matter and aware that your good opinion, once lost, would be a privilege difficult to regain. Alana Bloom is easier to persuade." Well. Will didn't expect him to be quite so…blatant.

"Implying in one fell swoop not only that my good opinion is a prize to be desired, but that I'm somehow more difficult to manipulate than an esteemed colleague professionally trained to recognize said manipulation," Will says, breaking out into a full-blown grin when the other man doesn't so much as flinch at the accusation. "Flatterer."

"I did promise I would not lie to you, Will."

"That you did," Will agrees. Both are aware, of course, that sins of omission have not been similarly removed from the table, and that there are *dozens* of those still scattered between them. But then, that's part of the fun. The trick is not only in finding the right questions to ask, but also in discerning how much of the answers to offer up in return without giving away the whole game.

"You know, I think I would be interested in seeing what would happen should the two of you meet," Will says, arms folded across his chest in an air of challenge. "I wonder how you will assess each other."

“Should I be nervous?” Hannibal asks, coyly, but Will is curious whether or not it might also be partly sincere.

“Guess that all depends on what she thinks of you,” he responds sweetly. He’s aware they’re treading on dangerous ground now, however. Regardless of where his curiosity leads *him* ultimately, he has no intention of letting Abigail get hurt as a result of whatever weird game this is they’re playing. “And on what happens after that,” he adds more gravely. Let the alpha make of that what he will. It’s not a threat, unless a threat is what it has to be.

Hannibal nods once, in silent acknowledgment of the ultimatum Will has laid out, murky though its boundaries may be at the moment. “You value Miss Hobbs and her opinions highly, despite having only recently made her acquaintance.”

“Well, we have so much in common,” Will comments dryly. He almost teases that the alpha sounds close to jealous, but knowing that can’t be it, chooses not to waste his breath on the remark. Deciding to go for honesty instead in this case, he says, “I’m a little surprised about it myself actually. I never really made friends in school. I’m not even sure if this is what it’s supposed to be like. Sometimes I think it’s more like…” He pauses to breathe out a silent, self-deprecating chuckle. “It’s a cliché to even say it, but it’s more like she’s the sister I never got to have.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he imagines he sees almost a flicker of *something* behind the other man’s impassive gaze, but when he turns his head fully to look, it’s not there. Curious.

“You reject the familial bonds Jack and Alana would tie to you subliminally, yet freely and openly make that very same connection back to Abigail.”

“Neither of us is trying to be the other one’s parent,” Will points out wryly. “Don’t think for a second we wouldn’t resent the hell out of each other if either of us tried it.”

“You want a peer, not a guiding hand that assumes it knows best.”

“Now, if only Bloom and Crawford were as understanding of that as you,” Will replies, but the tone and meaning of his statement are loaded. A warning.

Don’t you fucking dare try to 'guide' me or tell me what to do.

“If only,” Hannibal replies in kind, the micro change to his expression almost as blatant as a wink.

Wouldn’t dream of it, dear Will.

*

“Beverly Katz. You’re on Crawford’s team, right?” Alana asks, greeting the visitor Grace waved her over for in the lobby the next morning.

“Yes, ma’am,” the other beta says, warm and casual as she shakes Alana’s hand, though with just a hint of discomfort as if she’s less than thrilled about being here. The thick manila folder tucked under her other arm gives the psychiatrist a clue as to why.

“And what is that exactly?” Bloom asks, gesturing to it with a tilt of her head. She tries to keep the irritation out of her voice, knowing the other woman probably wants to be doing this about as much as Alana wants it, which is not at all.

Katz sighs. “Look, I don’t want to get in the middle of whatever this beef between you and Jack is, but he said this was something that couldn’t be done over the phone, and he knows you don’t want him showing up here, so…” She shrugs. “He sent me instead.”

“Sent you for what though?”

Ducking her head almost guiltily, Katz looks back up only a moment later, the file clutched loosely in both hands now and presented outward in front of her for the other woman to take. Alana does, her eyes widening as she flips through the first couple of pictures placed at the top of the stack.

“Jack wants me to ask Will Graham what he knows about *gardening.”*

Chapter End Notes

Forever mourning the beautiful connection Abigail could have had with Hannibal and Will if they hadn't been trying so hard to be her dads on the show. D':

Swans Reflecting Elephants

Chapter Notes

In which another look-back to dolargram days mirrors aspects of stories such as *Bluebeard's Wife* and *Beauty and the Beast,* and serves to remind us that there are some hard truths in the subtexts those fairy tales don't want us to examine too closely. ~~Just ignore the fact that the author adores Beauty and the Beast and wrote a hannigram AU based on it forever ago, shhhh.~~

Title from the painting by Salvador Dalí.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VII. Swans Reflecting Elephants

Much as he loved nature as a boy, Will never had much of an interest in gardening growing up, and his dad would always joke that the Graham men had black thumbs because of all the engine grease anyway. They never stayed still in one place long enough even to raise a single houseplant to maturity, so Will never got to find out if that old adage held true for him as well or not.

Six years of house arrest on one large, sprawling, overgrown property is more than enough time for any individual to learn though. Turns out that Will is a natural at it, in fact.

It started a few months after he moved in, when he found some wild berries growing along the fence line and began to wonder what other plants he could coax into growing there, once Francis trusted him enough not to run off at the first opportunity and let him wander around outside on his own—while Francis watched discreetly through the gaps in the curtains, of course.

It would be a longer while yet after that before the alpha started working from home less and stopped locking the house up tightly to keep Will inside every time he left. The locked and chained wrought-iron gate separating their high fenced-in property from the long, winding road that spanned miles between them and the nearest town was enough of a deterrent to anyone getting in or out anyway, he eventually decided.

That meant Will needed something to do during those long hours on his own, and there was only so much exploring he could do before he ran out of new spaces to discover, so much reading he could do before his eyes started to droop (and if he didn't pace himself he'd run out of books in the long run anyway), so much cleaning he could do like a *fucking housewife* until every surface in the house was spotless except for that one nasty room his mate's late

grandmother used to sleep in that Will was told to leave exactly as it was and *never, ever enter* if he could help it.

He'd had plans and ambitions for what he wanted to do after high school, goals that had gotten shunted and put on the back burner not long after his dad's passing anyway, and which were easy, too easy, to keep putting aside and bury somewhere deep because he already had his purpose, *here,* at home, where Frankie needed him the most. Sweet, fragile, loving Frankie who needed an escape from all the ugly and petty foibles of the world but couldn't have that as long as his home remained an empty, dilapidated, echoing ruin of his grandmother's legacy. The Dragon, who needed someone who *understood* his Becoming and didn't turn away from it out of fear or disgust. Francis Dolarhyde, a man so broken by the world he couldn't help but latch his claws deeply into the one bright, good thing he had in his life and refuse to let up or let go even for one second, lest it slip from his grasp and fly away never to return.

So, Will took up gardening, and took *to it* far more enthusiastically than he would have expected of himself in a previous life. There was something oh-so-satisfying about clearing out the weeds and tilling up the land, to stepping out in the yard in the early morning light to find those first sprouts growing out of the ground and know that *he* had done that.

Once he fully figured out what he was doing, he graduated fairly quickly from a few simple herbs and flower pots to actual crops, adding squash and tomato seeds and saplings to the regular shopping list underneath other requests like books and painting supplies and new strings for the piano.

The piano was another hobby Will would generally only indulge in alone, his mate having an aversion to the instrument and preferring to listen to the pop and crackle of old records instead. *Bad memories,* he would say, and on the rare occasions Will would make a mistake and hit a wrong note, the older man would reflexively flinch and curl his fingers in sharply as though they stung him, often quickly excusing himself from the room afterwards, if Will hadn't already stopped at that point.

But the gardening was something his alpha never minded. Overtime it took over enough of Will's daily routine that he could almost stylize himself a smalltime farmer, and that was when his design suddenly became much more grandiose. Because why not? Why shouldn't he throw himself wholeheartedly into this? It wasn't like he had anything better to do.

The next day he flipped open a small journal and started sketching a plan for where they could build a chicken coop, maybe also a fenced-in pen for some pigs or a goat, and perhaps most optimistically of all, a little doghouse they could set out right at the edge of the back porch. He presented it to the other man as soon as he got home from work, flushed and pleased with himself, barely giving the man time to settle with a glass of scotch in his hand before he excitedly began to rattle off a list of supplies they would need, the most cost-effective ways they could build it all together, what types of feed would be best suited for the hens…

"No." Cold and weighted, the word didn't even register in Will's brain at first, not until the journal in the alpha's hand was just as abruptly flipped closed with the same air of finality.

“No?” he’d asked, voice flat at first, still not quite parsing the word correctly in his head. Then, *“No?* What do you mean no? You didn’t even really *look*…is it the cost? Because I told you, it’s actually not all that expensive, and we don’t have to do it all at once, Frank—”

The glass tumbler slammed loudly down onto the side table, the sudden noise sharp enough to make Will flinch and his ears twitch, cutting him off mid-rant.

“There will be no animals in this house,” Francis quietly rasped. “I cannot abide their…their *squawking,* their filth, their *stench.* I will not.”

“But they wouldn’t be in the house,” Will protested, silently squashing the secret hopes he’d had of being woken in the mornings to happy yipping and little paws scrabbling across the wooden floors. “They’d be outside.”

“The answer is no, Will. Do not ask me again.”

“But…” Will had trailed off, his eyes landing on the alpha’s fingers, knuckles white from how tightly they were still wrapped around the glass, and the tense set of the alpha’s jaw. Then he *imagined* it for the first time, the two of them wrapped around one another in bed, pre-dawn light filtering in through the curtains, until the rooster started crowing outside or *worse,* the barks and howls of a puppy just wanting some attention started up at two in the morning. He imagined the contained rage in Francis’s muscles as he climbed out of bed and stalked out of the room, the barks ending abruptly a few seconds later with a high-pitched yelp, followed by utter silence.

He hadn’t noticed the man standing, his eyes burning and too blurred to see, until with a gentle kiss against his temple, Francis whispered imploringly against Will’s ear that he not stay angry with him for too long, then padded as softly as one could in booted feet out of the room. Will had stood there, frozen and unmoving, until the ice from Frank’s glass had sweated a deep ring of moisture into the antique wooden table.

He never asked again.

*

“So, know anything about gardening?” Agent Katz quips as they take their seats across from each other in Bloom’s office. Will shrugs off-handedly.

He takes the file when she offers it to him, eyes widening a bit when he opens it because whatever he thought she might have meant by asking that question, this is not exactly it.

What he sees in front of him is stark, vivid *life* springing up from the dead. Perhaps this killer’s reasons for growing a garden aren’t quite the same as Will’s own, here a beige and brown landscape of mushrooms and fungi sprouting from rotting human bodies as opposed to lush green leaves and budding flowers and vegetables. But then again, perhaps they’re not so different, for did Will not occasionally chatter about nothing and everything in particular and scratch secret messages in the earth before brushing them away, even though he’d always been fairly certain the concept of talking to one’s plants to make them happier and healthier was little more than a silly old wives’ tale?

“Connection,” he murmurs aloud for the agent’s benefit. “That’s what he’s looking for.”

“Oh-kay. Maybe someone should’ve told him burying people alive in the dirt isn’t exactly the best way to go about making new friends.”

“Alive?” Will asks, and Katz nods, explaining that one of the victims had in fact still been breathing when they investigated the crime scene, though he died on the way to the hospital. Will looks down at the pictures again and frowns. The victims are all covered under barely a few inches of dirt and unrestrained. That meant not only that they must have all been unconscious at the time of burial, but that their gardener was confident none of them would ever wake up again. What would give him that level of confidence? Something medical perhaps, like a concussion or…

“Um,” Will says, sucking in his bottom lip as he thinks. “I don’t know much about diseases, but aren’t there some that could induce comas? Like narcolepsy, or even something more common, like a diabetic with dangerously imbalanced sugar levels?”

Katz looks taken aback for a moment, then her eyes light up in epiphany. “Diabetic ketoacidosis,” she breathes. “Hot damn, kid. Jack said you were good. He didn’t tell me you were an absolute freaking *genius.”* She sweeps the pictures back into the file folder and picks it up, already standing to leave. “You ever think about going into forensics or criminology, let me know. You’ll get a glowing recommendation letter from me.”

“Thanks,” he replies, a bit bashful from the amount of praise he’s getting after only giving his input in a barely five-minute conversation.

Doctor Bloom stands a little straighter when they exit the room, immediately coming over to ask if everything is alright. Will is honestly half-surprised she wasn’t listening at the door, almost as surprised as he was that she agreed to letting him talk to the agent alone in the first place, after stressing to him over and over again that he didn’t have to do this if he didn’t want to, that he could stop at any time if he felt uncomfortable continuing, and that she would be right outside if he needed her for anything.

She seems relieved to find there’s nothing wrong and that their talk simply ended sooner than expected, though a hint of wariness mars it when Beverly talks him up again and expresses to her how much of a help he was to the investigation. Will doesn’t need to be a supposed “genius” to guess the doctor is thinking about what this will mean for future visits.

Katz and Bloom both had him swear to secrecy about what he learned today since it’s all part of an ongoing investigation, so naturally he waits until he and Abigail are utterly alone in the enclosed greenhouse later to tell her everything. The ever–changing expressions of mild disgust, intrigue, horror, and curious delight that cross over her face as he regales her are more than worth it.

“I still don’t get what you mean about the whole ‘connection’ thing. Explain that to me more.”

“Okay, it’s like, the way mushrooms branch out from each other, the patterns they grow in, it sort of looks like neurons in a nervous system, right?” he says. Abigail nods tentatively,

scrunches up her nose and mouth as she tilts her head and tries to picture it, then nods again more firmly. “It’s sort of…a representation of that made literal,” he continues. “I think in a way maybe he does see it literally. This guy, there’s a barrier he can’t cross between him and other people, a disconnect. He wants to bridge that gap. He wants,” Will spreads his hands wide. “To be understood.”

“Wow.” Abigail sits silently for a moment, absorbing it all. “I get it now, I think. When you describe it that way I get these hazy images, kind of like an outline in charcoal. I imagine for you it’s more like a huge, vivid painting, huh?”

“Very, very vivid,” Will agrees. “And in full Technicolor.”

“That must be pretty useful, even if it does suck sometimes.”

Will laughs loudly. “The agent, she uh, implied pretty heavily that I should make a career out of it. Profiling criminals, I mean.”

“Not gonna lie, that sounds totally badass.” Both of them snort laughter at that one. “Is it something you’d be interested in doing though?”

Will shrugs. “I don’t know. Is it bad if I say I haven’t really thought that far ahead yet?”

“You haven’t? I think about it all the time,” she says.

“Oh, really? Pray tell what your plans are, Miss I-Already-Have-All-My-Shit-Together.”

Abigail shrugs as well. “It changes about every week,” she admits. Will rolls his eyes and smirks. “At first, I thought maybe I’d like to try getting into the FBI, but I kind of doubt they’d let me in, given the family history.” Her fingers reach up, nearly tugging at where her scarf would be if she were wearing one. She doesn’t bother with them as much when she and Will are alone, emboldened perhaps by solidarity since Will does nothing to hide his own scars. “Lately I’ve been thinking about psychiatry too, but I’m not sure yet. It’s kind of a moot point for right now anyway,” she adds wryly. “Dad killing girls at every college I applied for sort of puts me off wanting to go for awhile.”

“At least you have your diploma,” Will points out just as dryly. Despite everything going down when she still had a few months of school left, the administration had ‘thoughtfully’ decided to issue her diploma early in light of ‘extenuating circumstances,’ citing that she already had enough credits as an honors student to graduate on at least the minimum plan anyway. Abigail believed they just didn’t want to risk the possibility of the ‘murder girl’ coming back to reenroll later and told Will as much when she got her diploma in the mail.

She side-eyes him now almost guiltily. “I forgot you don’t have the same luxury,” she says honestly. “Are you gonna go back to high school after you get out of here?”

“Oh, fuck no,” Will scoffs. “Two more years of that living nightmare all over again? I think I’ll pass. Besides, I think they’d be just as freaked out by the creepy, damaged old guy on campus.”

“Early twenties is not *old,”* Abigail protests.

“It is in high school years,” he retorts, and Abigail has no response for that, because of course he’s right. “I guess what I’ll do is get my GED eventually. Figure out the rest after that, or make it up as I go. Or win the lottery and become a multimillionaire, whichever comes first.”

It’s Abigail’s turn to roll her eyes this time. “Sounds like you’ve got more figured out than you thought.”

“Guess so,” he says. They stop speaking abruptly as one of the nurses pokes her head in through the door and tells them to come inside for dinner.

“Think there’ll be any mushrooms on the menu?” Abigail whispers as they head inside. It takes Will quite a bit of fortitude to keep from cracking a smile.

*

The next morning starts out slow and lazy like molasses. Will doesn’t feel up for hanging out much with Abigail today. Maybe it’s just everything he learned yesterday sinking in and dredging up old memories, but he feels more contemplative and reserved, like he just wants to be alone for now. He lets Abigail know and heads outside on his own while most of the other omegas make their way sleepily to group sessions or the rec room.

The sky still has that soft morning brightness, the smell of dew on the grass and rich, warm earth lifting up to meet his nostrils as he wends a lazy path to the koi pond. He stares at the fish and thinks idly about how pissed off Bloom would be if he snuck in a fishing pole somehow and started stirring them up, but the idea holds little amusement for him.

An odd flash of movement out of the corner of his eye draws his attention, and what he sees when he looks up makes him tilt his head curiously.

There is a man hopping the fence to get inside, tall, pale, and a bit uncoordinated as he lands on his feet. The man pushes his glasses back up the bridge of his nose and starts walking quickly toward Will as soon as he spots him. There is a gun in his other hand, yet Will feels unafraid, standing up and brushing the dirt off his knees with a calm and easy demeanor.

“Hi there,” he greets softly as the man comes close enough to hear.

“Are you Will Graham?” the stranger, a beta he scents now, asks. His voice is loud with a warbling sense of urgency to it.

Will nods. “I am. What’s your name?” he asks, hands dangling loose at his sides, though not in his pockets as they normally would be. He doesn’t want the man to feel paranoid or startle. He doesn’t raise them above his head either as most people would do in this situation. This is just a conversation, until one of them changes the script.

“Eldon Stammets,” the beta answers without hesitation, as if it doesn’t occur to him that there would be any reason to lie. Will supposes there really wouldn’t be at this point.

“It’s nice to meet you, Eldon,” Will says, offering a small smile. “Are you the man who’s been burying people?” Again, the man nods without a hint of hesitation.

“She said you could help me. She said you would understand.”

“She?” Will asks, genuinely perplexed.

“The red-headed reporter.” Freddie Lounds. *Of course.* Will wonders what the hell made Lounds say that and send Stammets here, but that’s not important at the moment.

“What can I help you with, Eldon? No offense, but if it’s burying more people, you’ve got the wrong guy.” The way the man’s face crumples in distress when he says this makes Will’s heart clench.

“Sh-she said you would understand!” he repeats. The gun in his hand wavers and raises, but it’s pointed aimlessly off to the side, not at Will, so he takes a cautious step forward. “She said you would help me—”

“To be understood?” Will finishes. He takes a deep breath and another step forward. *“To see.* It’s harder to do that sometimes. Your horse is hitched to a post somewhere along Asperger’s and autism, right?” he asks. Eldon blinks, and Will smiles in return. “Mine too. We just got hit with opposite ends of the empathy stick, I think,” he continues. “I see *too much,* you see too little...” He shrugs. “Our experiences may differ a little, but I can tell you it’s not any easier from where I’m standing than from where you are.”

“It’s too much, it’s too little,” Eldon agrees. “Thought, human thoughts, the exchange of ideas, it’s a wonderful thing! Thoughts leap from brain to brain. They mutate. They *evolve.”*

“Like the fungi,” Will says.

“Exactly like the fungi!” says Stammets ecstatically. “Walk into a field of mycelium, they know you are there! Their spores reach for you when you pass by.”

Will nods along, seeing it. He hears sirens in the distance now and steps closer. “Eldon, can you give me your gun?”

Stammets looks at him in confusion, then seems to understand as the sirens grow louder. “I was...I was going to—”

“Bury me, I know,” Will says. “And at first, that’s all they’ll understand. But I see it, Eldon. I *understand.* You don’t have to bury me for that, and I’ll make sure *they* see it too.” He outstretches his hand, palm upward. “Please give me the gun.”

Eldon hands it over, and Will tosses it over the pond, flinging it far enough to land on the other side in the grass instead of in the water. He hears the facility doors flinging open behind him and positions himself strategically so that he’s in the way of anyone trying to take a crack shot at Stammets, then rests a gentle hand on the man’s shoulder when he sees that he’s begun shaking.

“It’s okay, Eldon. Everything’s going to be fine,” he reassures. The agents are shouting for Stammets to stand down and get on the ground. Will tilts his head enough to shout back. *“He’s unarmed! The gun’s there!”* he points. “Come on, Eldon,” he says, voice quiet again, and tugs lightly on the older man’s arm to get him to kneel down in the grass with him.

The poor man seems on the verge of tears and ready to shake out of his own skin as one of the agents frisks him and cuffs his hands behind his back, only managing to keep calm because of Will’s continued reassurances and refusal to be pushed out of the way.

Will walks with them and watches them put the beta into a car and drive away, a little bit sad, a little bit relieved, a little bit hopeful that things really will be fine and Stammets will get the help that he needs. The windows of the facility are crowded by omegan faces and those of the nurses, the front lawn packed with too many dark sedans and SUVs and lingering FBI agents milling around all over the place.

He smells Crawford before he sees him, picking out the alpha’s scent among the others, and turns his head sideways to look in rough approximation at the man’s shirt collar as he approaches.

“You did good today, son,” Jack says, and claps him once on the shoulder before stepping away again to get back to ordering his men around.

Will rolls his shoulders back, twinges his jaw a bit, and hopes the follow-up interviews won’t last too long. He thinks probably no one will begrudge him if he retires to his room afterwards and goes back to bed for the rest of the day.

Chapter End Notes

I always felt that if Stammets didn't make the mistake of going after Abigail in s1, Will would have been a lot more sympathetic towards him when he caught him. I've also 100% always headcanoned him as autistic just like Will, though now as much as I hate that there's a need for it at all, I feel I should make a quick PSA. *clears throat*

In no way, shape, or form do I want people taking away from this that there is any sort of link between autism and violence. There is **NOT.** These characters happen to be autistic because I read them as such, that's all. Eldon does NOT kill people because he is autistic. Will is NOT a dark character capable of violence because he is autistic. Those are separate and unrelated things. If I see anyone implying otherwise in the comments or elsewhere, we're gonna have words, son, and it's not gonna be pretty. Thank you and have an awesome day, this has been a PSA! :D

Galatea of the Spheres

Chapter Notes

> Two Dalí-inspired chapter names in a row! Holy bananas, Batman, if I'm not careful, my chapter titles might start to seem like they make actual cohesive sense!
>
> Here's chapter eight a whole month later than I wanted to make it happen. :P One of these days, guys, I'm gonna set myself on an updating schedule that actually sticks. *One of these days...*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

VIII. Galatea of the Spheres

"Of all the reckless, idiotic, *irresponsible* decisions you could have made—"

"Doctor Bloom, I can assure you I had no idea that Eldon Stammets would come here," says Crawford.

"Oh, really? That certainly explains the half dozen FBI vehicles currently parked in my front lawn," Alana sneers.

"My team and I came as soon as we learned where he was headed—"

"And it didn't even occur to you to maybe call ahead and warn us?" Alana snaps.

"Warning you ahead of time would have caused an unnecessary panic," Crawford explains. "I couldn't risk Stammets figuring out we had a bead on him and acting out rashly. Our goal was to bring him in peacefully if we could, and that's exactly what we did."

"No, that's exactly what Will Graham did *for you.* Just as you were hoping he would." The accusation hangs heavily in the air. Crawford says nothing to refute it.

"He could have been killed, Jack," she says, voice quiet and steely where it had been loud and impassioned a moment before, though no less thick with emotion now. "Stammets was armed when he got here. Any one of my patients or staff could have been hurt if they'd gotten in his way."

Jack sighs. "I'll have the bureau set up a security detail here for the next few weeks, just until all this craziness has died down a bit."

“A bunch of alphas with guns patrolling the fence line? That’s sure to make a facility full of omegas traumatized by past violence and abuse feel safe,” she notes sarcastically.

“What else do you want me to do?” Crawford bites back.

“I want some assurance that this isn’t going to happen again, Jack! For the sake of everyone here and *especially* for Will. You’ve done enough damage to him already.”

“How? How have I damaged him exactly? By giving him a chance most people don’t get to do something for the greater good and save lives? By saving his own life before that?”

“How about by shooting his mate in the face in front of him and then continuing to expose him to more trauma afterwards!”

Jack winces slightly and turns his head away for a moment. He is almost relieved when Zeller pokes his head in the door and asks for a word. Almost.

He follows the younger alpha outside, away from the cars and other agents where they can have some semblance of privacy. Jack does his best to channel some of that “Guru” Zen the students know him for at the Academy, rather than get mad and let his anger build up into a lot of yelling that might rile the omegas inside up and that Alana would almost certainly chastise him some more over. He suspects he already knows what’s coming, having figured it out on his own hours ago after interrogating a visibly rattled Freddie Lounds earlier, and simply hasn’t had the time or patience to deal with it himself just yet.

“I fucked up, boss,” Zeller admits, swallowing nervously. “Freddie Lounds knew to tell Stammets about Graham because I told her about him.”

“I know,” Jack tells him. “Zee, I’m not an idiot,” he says when the younger man has the gall to look surprised about it. “Three people besides myself knew we were consulting with Will Graham, only one of whom came in late to work recently smelling of ladies’ perfume, and it wasn’t Katz or Price,” Crawford snipes. “The only reason I can imagine she didn’t publish an article about it first was she didn’t want to risk outing her source this soon.”

Zeller grimaces, head bowed in submission to the superior alpha and rubbing the back of his neck guiltily. “I told her it was off the record but…even if she wasn’t going to write about it, I know it was stupid to tell her anything. It won’t happen again, I swear.”

“You’re damn right it won’t happen again,” Jack growls. Zeller winces.

“Am…am I fired? Sir?” Crawford relents a bit, reigning his temper back in.

“You’re not fired, Zeller. Not this time,” he warns. “But if you put a single toe out of line again—”

“I promise, sir, that won’t happen.”

“Did I ask you to interrupt me?” Crawford barks. “No. Now you will stand there and listen quietly until I’m through speaking. Nod if you understand.” Zee does. It’s another one of Crawford’s unique talents; to get where Jack has gotten in life, one must carry a certain level

of presence and authority to make other alphas, particularly younger, hot-headed ones like Brian Zeller, willing to obey and submit without challenge or resentment. “I just got my ass chewed out in there by Alana Bloom over this whole fiasco. The BSU will be lucky if she doesn’t lodge a formal complaint with the bureau, which she has every damn right to do considering the circumstances,” he continues, gesturing to the crowd of agents and cars that haven’t left yet.

“You failed in your duties when you revealed sensitive information to an outsider. That means *I* failed because you’re my responsibility as a member of my team. I don’t like failing at my job, Zee. Nod again if you understand.” Zeller nods again, looking as if he’s waiting for the ground under his feet to swallow him whole. Crawford sighs, anger slowly draining as he finishes saying his piece.

With one hand clapped on the younger man’s shoulder, he says, “Look, Brian, I don’t give a damn what you do or who you spend time with outside of work, just *keep it* outside of work from now on. This doesn’t have to go to the review board. It stays between you and me, alright?” He’s already decided when Prurnell asks him why Stammets chose to come here, he’ll claim the man must have read about Will in Lounds’ previous articles and sought a connection through that, leaving out the details of Will’s involvement with the current investigation. It might even be partly true for all that he knows at the moment.

“Thank you, boss,” says Zeller with gratitude.

“Don’t thank me just yet. I expect twice the usual effort from you on the job until you drop, Zee. Prove to me that you still deserve my trust.” Zeller agrees readily to do just that, and Jack sends him off to tell the rest of the agents to finish up and get ready to head back to Quantico. He’ll be glad to get out of here before Bloom finds another reason to bite his head off.

*

Hannibal closes his briefcase, preparing to close up the office and go home for a long lunch break as it won’t be until late afternoon that he has to return for another appointment. A call from Alana Bloom just as he is about to lock up puts a halt to those particular plans.

“It’s Will,” she tells him as soon as the initial greetings are exchanged. This is not a surprise. There is little else she would be likely to call him about with such urgency in her voice. *“Jack’s really done it this time. He roped Will into helping him with another case, and the killer…he came* here, *Hannibal. For Will.”*

“Is Will alright?” Hannibal asks, already walking toward his car now not to go home, but to make the drive to Port Haven immediately. His accelerated heartrate is not something he dismisses out of hand either. Curious as he is about what happened, this news is genuinely alarming to him.

“Physically, he’s fine. I don’t know how, but he talked Stammets down from whatever he was planning and convinced him to toss his gun.” Instantly, the tension dissipates and Hannibal’s muscles loosen and relax. The omega is alive and uninjured; that is all that matters to him.

Any psychological damage he may have suffered will just make him all the more interesting and add another fascinating layer to unravel later, after all.

"When I think about what might have happened if he hadn't..." she continues before stopping herself and taking a breath. *"Now that the FBI have gone though, Will won't come out of his room or talk to anyone. He says he needs space, but I don't like the idea of just leaving him alone like this after what he's been through. I'm sorry, I know you have your own patients, but calling you seemed like the best solution for everyone."*

"I'm glad you did. As it happens, I am free for the afternoon and on my way to you now." He will call and cancel his later appointment with deepest apologies as soon as he is off the phone with Alana, never mind his own 24-hour cancellation policy. It does not extend to true emergencies, which he can certainly claim this is.

"I can't thank you enough, Hannibal," Alana says. With a steelier edge, she adds, *"I could kill Jack Crawford for this."*

Delightful as it is to picture a scenario in which Alana could truly be pushed to do exactly that, he is not altogether certain the man will still be alive by the time she reaches that tipping point. He has already been flipping through potential recipes in his mind from the moment Alana informed him of the reason Will was put in harm's way in the first place. It is past time he meets this Jack Crawford for himself. A pity the man will no longer be on the scene when Hannibal gets there, but he can always arrange for Alana to introduce them later.

Many of the omegas, he is informed once he arrives, are huddled together in the rec room or ensconced away in group sessions to sort through their feelings over the day's excitement. He is therefore most intrigued when a perfectly clear-eyed girl with a ponytail approaches him, on naturally silent hunter's footsteps, just as he is about to reach Will's door.

"Will doesn't want to be disturbed right now," she tells him straight off. Even her voice, low and quiet as a deer's and pleasantly feminine, has that underlying warning rumble of the predator within. Already, Hannibal can see why Will likes her. He chooses to play along and get to know this young woman better while he has an opportunity to do so without interference.

"So I have been informed. Has he appointed you his faithful lookout for would-be intruders?" Hannibal asks with a playful and disarming smile.

"I appointed myself," she says with a grim little smile of her own that does not reach her eyes. "He would do the same for me."

"You must be Abigail Hobbs," he says then, as though he had not already deduced as much. Her stance shifts, eyes darting to more thoroughly analyze his appearance as she quietly and quickly reassesses this stranger who knows her name.

"You're that other doctor Bloom has him seeing," she correctly guesses.

"Hannibal Lecter," he introduces himself properly. It is peculiarly gratifying to know Will must have mentioned him, even if perhaps only in passing.

“What makes you think he’ll want to talk to you any more than he wants to see Bloom or anybody else?” she asks, probing yet also genuinely curious.

“Perhaps he will not,” Hannibal answers. “Perhaps he will turn me away and slam the door the moment he sees my face,” he adds, attitude still playful, enough so that it draws a sincerer smirk out of her this time.

“I doubt that,” she says. “He says you may be a bullshitter like all the rest, but you’re smarter about it and that makes you more fun.”

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. “I am surprised he would speak at such length about me, though I am flattered by the compliment.”

“Do you like Will, Doctor Lecter?” she asks, switching gears abruptly. She shares the other omega’s penchant for bluntness; he understands better now how the two could well indeed pass for brother and sister.

“Very much so,” Lecter replies. “I wish to be his friend.”

She has a thoughtful air about her as she considers that statement, seemingly trying to suss out some hidden meaning to it just as Will had done when given the very same answer. They are very much alike in that regard, though this girl is not quite so adept at covering her own responses and disguising them as something else. At least, not yet. Given enough time around the slightly older omega, Hannibal is sure Abigail will prove to be a quick learner herself.

“Okay,” she says at last, having seemingly made up her mind to trust Hannibal at his word, at least for the moment. She steps aside in invitation, a clear signifier that he has passed her first test. She might be amateurish still at the game of manipulation, but at least she is not boring. “Just don’t do anything that might warrant me having to practice some of my sick bouncer moves on you. I used to watch pro wrestling with my mom on TV, so I know a lot of good ones.”

“I promise to be on my very best behavior with him,” he tells her with a wink. Her eyes narrow, though it is not entirely clear whether in amusement, suspicion, or deliberation upon something else altogether before she courteously takes her leave, leaving him standing alone in the hallway outside of Will’s door.

He knocks, and waits patiently for Will’s soft but steadily voiced, *“Come in,”* before turning the knob and entering.

*

“You know I could hear the two of you talking about me from in here,” Will tells the alpha, apropos of nothing, as soon as the man shuts the door behind him.

“Then I hope you did not hear anything that made your ears burn too redly,” Lecter responds. Will snorts and scoots to one side to make room for Lecter to sit beside him on the bed.

“Maybe I *should* have slammed that door right in your face,” he murmurs, almost as much to himself as to the older man.

“There’s still time. I could step back outside and knock again, allowing you the chance to have a do-over if you wish.”

Will looks sidelong at his companion, sitting so innocently and demurely with his hands clasped casually together in his lap. “You’re weird, you know that?”

“I’m just as weird as you are,” says Hannibal.

“Well, I don’t know if you’re *that* weird.” Frowning thoughtfully, Will stands and paces a bit in front of the window, Lecter’s eyes tracing his movements with a politely interested air. The omega looks down at his own hands, carefully considering his next words before settling on the simplest confession, “I…feel bad for Eldon Stammets.”

“Do you pity him for his compulsions? Or is it that you’re thinking of him now being in the hands of those who would not understand them?”

“It’s not *pity,”* Will defends, the last word coming out jagged and barbed on his tongue. For a moment, he is reminded of Francis and the stillness of his face, even as his mouth had twisted around a similar statement. *‘I have no pity,’* he had said once, as though pity were something weak to be reviled. His jaw twinges at the memory.

Will feels pity all the time, oodles of it, for himself, for his dead mate, for the sad little omegas who have to live here—even sometimes for Crawford and Bloom, who both try so hard but just never quite seem to *get it.* He feels it often enough to know the difference between that and what he feels now.

“They dug up his mushroom garden,” he continues quietly and then, absurdly, he’s thinking of his own little garden patch, overgrown and untended now, the fruits rotting off the vine and choked with weeds and thorn, human hands covered by spores and a myriad of other fungal growths sprouting up amongst them. “They dug it up and now he’ll never get to grow another one,” he mutters darkly.

“That *is* a pity.” Will blinks, not sure if he heard that right, and slowly lifts his gaze to find the other man gazing steadily back at him. “There is a beautiful sort of symmetry to it,” Hannibal continues. “The labors of death giving birth to the fruits of life.” He gives a half-smile, almost wry. “Merely giving voice to the unmentionable.”

The younger man tilts his head at that, curious. “Isn’t the unmentionable by its very name something that *shouldn’t* be voiced?”

“Shouldn’t? I don’t know about that.” Lecter stands, and Will, although aware that they have stood this close on multiple occasions before, really *notices* for the first time that while the alpha has a very distinct presence in the way he carries himself, he doesn’t *loom,* at least not in a way that would raise Will’s hackles. He’s not sure what that really means yet.

“Will, would you mind if I came to visit here again? We would still be continuing our regular sessions at my office, of course.”

“What, once a week isn’t enough for you now?” Will rolls his eyes. “Need to come to check on the princess at his tower?”

“You are no princess, Will Graham,” says Hannibal with so straight a face that Will has to laugh, cracking up into an unexpected fit of giggles within seconds. Hannibal breaks his detached façade to smirk victoriously at him in return.

*

He will revisit this moment later, alone in his house on Chandler Square, recreating the notes of Will’s laughter perfectly in his mind palace and carrying them down its echoing corridors to a room filled with teacups and feathers, the silver flash of fish scales caught in the sunlight, coy smirks pulling at jagged scars and troubled, wobbling smiles. There he will release them to mingle with the rest in jumbled, disorganized, beautiful chaos.

When he draws himself back into the present moment to carry out his remaining nightly errands before retiring to bed, he will note that since he visited it last, the room has gotten larger.

Chapter End Notes

Goddamn but seriously, writing a version of Hannibal that has at least like *an ounce of chill* around Will should not be this hard.

Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting

Chapter Summary

Hannibal has a revelation.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the inexcusably long hiatus! If you follow me on tumblr, you're probably at least peripherally aware it's been a strange past few months for me irl, so it's been difficult for me to focus on my longer WIPs and my attention has shifted mostly onto quick and sweet spideypool prompts lately. But I'm back now, baby, and raring to go! ^_~

This chapter, fluff happens because I'm still in the holiday spirit, y'all. You're welcome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

IX. Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting

The online auction is, understandably, quite the frenzied affair. Beneath the thin veneer of civility among the curious and the rich is an insatiable hunger for just a taste of something morbid or taboo, and nowhere is that more apparent than in the ludicrous bids and “polite inquiries” within the comments section of nearly every item from the Dragon’s home put up for sale.

Hannibal imagines a scenario in which he, too, is one day caught, every scrap of furniture he has carefully procured for his house over the years virtually salivated over in the same gauche manner, and while he attaches no strong sentiment to anything he owns, the thought nonetheless makes his lip curl in mild distaste. Yet it is curiosity that brought him to this page on his tablet as well, though not curiosity over the Dragon except in the most abstract sense.

It is while he browses, looking for anything that might offer some new sliver of insight into his now favorite puzzle, that he makes an interesting discovery, one that appears to have surprisingly garnered less attention than most of Dolarhyde’s peculiar knickknacks and antique curios. Littered among priceless heirlooms and other curiosities, the collection of seemingly bland nature landscapes must appear quite dull to most of the bidders in comparison.

Certainly they are painted by a somewhat amateurish, if clearly gifted, hand, but what they lack in technique they more than make up for in raw emotion. A solitary stag upon a snowy hilltop, a bloodied fox paw caught by bramble and thorn, a quiet stream, and others besides. No matter the subject, each painting conveys a sense of profound longing and loneliness that draws almost a sigh from the alpha, particularly when he brushes his finger over strokes in the stag's fur which blend seamlessly into fantastical feathers, only to feel a cold glass screen beneath.

Without a second thought, he places his own bid on the entire collection, then closes the tablet cover with a soft *thump.*

He spends more time carefully admiring each work once he has them all in his possession, wondering with a mixture of curiosity and amusement how Will would react if he were to hang one up in his office in plain view for the omega to see. Ultimately, he decides it would be for the best for now to keep them in his private study near some of his own favorite drawings, away from the prying eyes of others until he has a clearer understanding of where he and Will stand with one another.

Although he chooses not to reveal yet his knowledge of Graham's surprising hidden talent, that is no reason not to use other discoveries he has made concerning certain common themes running throughout the boy's art to his own advantage, and so it is with this particular card hidden up his sleeve that he decides to pick Will up himself and drive him into town the following week when it is time for their next appointment.

"This…isn't the way to your office," Will says, straightening warily from his slouch in the passenger seat as they pull down a road unfamiliar to him instead of taking the usual turn.

"No, it is not," Hannibal agrees. "I thought a change of scenery would do us both some good, and you can help me with a task I've been putting off for some time." As he says it, even he is not sure which words ring true and which are false, having allowed them to flow naturally in a manner that feels right as he has learned is often the best way to speak with Will and get the younger man to open up to him.

"So, where are we really going?" the omega asks. Hannibal only smiles and keeps his eyes forward on the road.

"I have noticed my thoughts taking a turn for the nostalgic more often of late," Hannibal confesses, turning now from the busier main streets of the city to less well-maintained, graveled backroads. "To simpler times at my childhood home. The soft smell of snow broken by the sharper scents of ancient pine and our horses corralled safely inside the stables. My father's favorite hunting hounds baying up at the moon."

"Tch, I knew you were always rich. Everything about you screams not just old world, but *old money."* Despite his tone, Will's grimace holds the additional bite of frustrated envy which he quickly hides, though not soon enough. Hannibal sees it and takes satisfaction from it, knowing its cause comes from something deeper and more wistful within Will than a desire for Hannibal's implied material wealth. It solidifies Hannibal's already firm resolve that this tack he has chosen is the correct one.

“It came upon me quite suddenly that I have perhaps allowed myself to fall into too sterile and rigid of an existence,” he continues. “I have decided on a whim to correct that today and hoped I might be able to solicit your assistance.”

“You realize how incredibly *not an answer* that is to my question, right?” Will huffs. “And just tossing it out there, I am *not* helping you bury a body in the woods if that’s what this is about. I already turned Eldon Stammets down on that one.” Sometimes his mouth forms words without him really thinking about how someone else might take them; jokes like that which are okay when someone *normal* makes them are apparently not quite so dismissible when coming from a serial killer’s widow. He darts his eyes quickly up at the older man’s face to see if he can find any trace of unease or suspicion, or even possibly disgust, nervous about what he might discover there.

“I beg of you to grant more credit to my imagination than that, Will, please. There are certainly more creative means to approach corpse disposal as a hobby,” the alpha tells him with a wink.

“You’re right, my mistake,” Will giggles, only a touch more hysterically than he means to out of relief. He should have known this alpha wouldn’t be scared off so easily. “Perish the thought. My sincerest apologies for assuming your M.O. would be anything so bland and unoriginal.”

“You are forgiven,” Hannibal assures him, putting his Bentley into park in an unassuming dirt driveway in front of a squat brick building with an enclosed backyard. “So long as you come inside and help me make a selection.”

“Selection,” says Will flatly. Hannibal smirks and steps out of the car. Will follows suit, about to make some dry remark on how maybe he isn’t the best candidate to help the man pick out groceries for his next dinner party or whatever this is, but then the *smells* hit his nose and the sound of several different yips and barks from inside the tall fence line reaches his ears. He turns his head to really look at the building for the first time and reads the *Baltimore Animal Sanctuary* sign emblazoned in gold lettering on the frosted glass door.

“You’re getting a dog?!” he exclaims, either unnoticing or uncaring of the fact that he’s completely forgotten for once to modulate the tone and volume of his voice in his excitement, unconsciously rocking on the balls of his feet and twitching his hands in short, rapid taps against his thighs in lieu of outright flapping them, a habit he thought he had long since left behind in his early childhood years.

“I am,” says Hannibal, using Will’s distraction to his advantage, drinking in the expression of stupefied amazement on the omega’s face greedily. “I considered the possibility of a cat instead, but while a feline may require less constant attention, I’m told it is more difficult and time-consuming to properly train one.”

Will snorts, his intense focus on trying to get a peek at some of the canines over the fence from where he stands somewhat tempered now into a more manageable good humor. “There’s the control freak I’m used to seeing,” he teases. Hannibal puts a hand to his own chest and looks around over both his shoulders as though uncertain who Will could be referring to, making the younger man roll his eyes.

“Come on, what are we waiting for?” he asks the doctor impatiently. Hannibal waves him forward with a gracious *‘after you’* gesture, following behind with a charmed grin he does not bother hiding as Will bounds ahead at almost a run.

“Well, hello there,” Will greets the lone ‘attendant’ at the register, an enormously fat grey cat lazily curled up on the countertop. Will extends his hand to let the cat sniff, but the creature only turns its nose up and flicks its tail once as if displeased. “Asshole,” Will drops his hand and smirks affectionately.

“That’s Mick and you’re right, he is an asshole,” says a girl with gelled hair spikes and a nose piercing as she steps in from a side room, removing a dirtied apron from around her waist and hanging it onto a hook on the wall behind her. “Throws a hissy fit anytime someone tries to shoo him off the counter, so we let him stay as sort of the company mascot now.” She turns back to face them with her hands on her hips. “I’m Angela, by the way. Is one of you the guy who called ahead a little while ago?”

“That would be me,” says Hannibal, taking a step forward to stand beside Will.

“Awesome. Well, you gentlemen aren’t here to see me obviously, so let’s not waste any more time. Follow me.”

She leads them around back to the kennels outside and leaves them to it without hovering, an act which Hannibal is grateful to her for since it allows him to observe Will and his reactions unimpeded.

And what a sight there is to behold. Hannibal is almost positive Will is unconscious of the adorably omegan noises coming out of the back of his throat as soon as he spots the animals playing in the open pen together—for Hannibal had called to ask the helpful omega on duty to gather their best-behaved canines most in need of a home so he could observe for himself how well they got along with each other as well as humans, just in case. The delighted whimper and almost-whine Will unashamedly makes as he joins them in the pen is echolalic of the noises the dogs are making, and calls many of them to attention right away as they take notice of the new potential playmate entering their sanctuary.

Hannibal stands at the gate to watch for the next several minutes while the omega immediately acquaints himself with each dog individually before joining in on the playful tussling. The layers of hardship, mistrust, and cynicism that normally grace the young man’s features melt away more and more with each happy bark, lick, and pet, and the difference to Hannibal is *striking.* He had thought the omega beautiful before, but this ecstatic, unmasked creature in front of him now is pure radiance. Will Graham, unfiltered and at the zenith of feeling, is temptation itself, and Hannibal believes he understands completely now how this boy, eyes wet with terror for his own life, could have sparked within Francis Dolarhyde’s breast the undeniable pull of deep, agonizing *want* all those years ago.

The alpha is nudged gently out of this train of thought by a cold nose at the back of his hand. He looks down into the deep brown eyes of the mostly tan retriever mix which had seemed most content with receiving the omega’s affections out of all the pack, not as playful as the others though certainly energetic enough. This close, he sees now that she has dark patches in her fur which he had mistaken for dirt from a distance.

She sits without prompting at Hannibal's side, for which the alpha rewards her with a good scratch behind the ears, curious that she would come to him when the others had mostly avoided the alpha and preferred to continue playing with their fellows and the young omega who had chosen to join in.

"She likes you," Will says with a crooked grin, having left the rest of the pack to their own devices to rejoin the psychiatrist, and bends now to affectionately rub the regal mutt down with both hands. "Don't tell the others, but you're also my favorite," he whispers conspiratorially to her. She licks him on the nose in answer, drawing a cheerful giggle out of him.

"It would seem my decision has been made for me then," says Hannibal.

"Looks like you didn't need me after all." With a low whistle, Will convinces the dog to follow him back to the entrance, a neat trick for someone who has never owned a pet before. Hannibal smiles in wonder at all the little surprises the omega continues to throw at him without even seemingly trying.

*

Hannibal observes quietly whilst the girl up front draws up their paperwork, bemused by the thoughtful staring contest that seems to be happening between Will and the dog that will soon become Hannibal's first pet in several decades. Though his glance returns to them both often, he does listen attentively while Angela explains all of the animal's needs—unnecessary as Hannibal has already done his own research and prepared accordingly, but it would be impolite to dismiss her words—and nods agreeably when she informs him that since the canine is spayed and has already had all of her shots, she will only need a bath before she can leave with them once the forms are filled out.

"All that's left now is to give her a name," Angela tells him brightly as they near the bottom of the final page.

"Winston," says Will immediately in a clear tone that brooks no argument. To Angela's credit, she does no more than mildly raise her eyebrows in surprise and snort once in amusement before scrawling the name in neat, blocky print in the appropriate field.

"Give me just a moment to make a copy of this in the back," she murmurs, and disappears briefly into the office directly behind her.

"Uh...sorry about that," Will mutters to Hannibal sheepishly once the three of them are alone. "I should've asked before up and naming your dog for you. It's just, um, I was sort of calling her Winston already in my head when we were playing outside, before I saw that she *was* a she. I'd been wracking my brain ever since trying to come up with another one, but..." He shrugs, clearly trying to play down his embarrassment regarding the situation. "Winston just *suits* her."

"I was thinking myself that such a noble beast requires an equally dignified name. Thank you for choosing it, Will. It would seem I could not have done this without you after all," the alpha replies, smirking.

Will rolls his eyes, but Hannibal is proud to note the pleased flush to his cheeks has returned as well. “Yeah well, you can always call her Winnie in front of other people if you want to avoid getting funny looks.”

The other omega returns before Hannibal can voice another response, this time to announce that all is now in order and everything needed is ready to give Winston her bath.

“Can I help?” Will asks eagerly.

“Absolutely!” she answers, pleased with Will’s enthusiasm. Her gaze shifts for a moment back to Hannibal before she addresses Will again. “Will your alpha be joining in too?”

“He’s...” *not,* Will starts to answer, then appears to decide it’s not worth bothering, shooting a wry smirk at the older man that conveys as much. *“...sure, whatever,”* he mutters, apparently to himself. “Are you?” he asks.

“I should be getting the backseat ready for Winston to ride comfortably with us actually. You two go ahead.” Hannibal waits until Will and Winston are cheerfully guided to another room in the back before he steps outside to follow through on his task.

Before even that, however, he first slides back into the front seat of his car and shuts the door softly so none will be able to see him through its tinted windows. He requires a moment to reflect on the flurry of feeling that had swept through him after the simple phrase *“your alpha,”* and the one that had followed after from Will’s unconcerned reaction to it.

“Ah,” he breathes privately to himself, gripping the steering wheel in front of him tightly with both hands. *So that is what this is,* he thinks. And what’s to be done about that?

After another slow breath and quiet moment of self-reflection, Hannibal steps out of the car to fetch from his trunk the worn linen bedsheet that will protect the leather upholstery of the backseat and keep Winston comfortable for the ride home.

Chapter End Notes

Ah yes, almost forgot the obligatory credit for the chapter title! This one I attribute to my absolute fave, Artemisia Gentileschi.

Militant and Triumphant

Chapter Notes

In which Will and Abigail get into a bar fight. :D

Title this time is from "The Church Militant and Triumphant" by Firenze ~~which I know means something completely different in that context than those adjectives usually mean on their own, I just like how it sounds as a phrase, I'm sorry~~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

X. Militant and Triumphant

"Actually, mind if I sit in the back with Winston?" asks Will after Hannibal has already pulled out of the shelter's driveway. The dog in question perks her ears, either already starting to recognize her unusual name or simply rising to attention as Will twists half his body around in the front passenger seat to look at her.

"You would be without a seatbelt," Hannibal points out neutrally. The buckles are all tucked away now underneath the sheet Hannibal spread out for her.

"I trust you not to jostle us too much," Will returns dryly. "And I'll duck down if there are any patrol cars around looking for someone to ticket."

Hannibal sighs, more for effect than genuine resignation, indulgence for indulgence's sake. He does it to see the quick, victorious smile that settles upon the omega's lips. "Very well. When the road is less narrow, I will find us somewhere to pull over."

"No need," Will assures him, unbuckling from his seat. "I can fit." Before the older man can ask what he means by that, Will is already climbing lithely over the center console, laughing at the way this seems to excite Winston into rising up and licking his face as soon as he's near enough. His right foot comes dangerously close to kicking Hannibal in the face as he sprawls forward, stopped only by Hannibal's gloved hand coming to stop Will's sneaker from making impact at the last moment.

He sighs again, perhaps a bit less indulgently this time. Only Will could manage to get away with something like this without having his name elegantly scrawled onto an index card and put away neatly in Hannibal's recipe box.

Will has enough shame to look mildly embarrassed and at the very least relieved when he looks back to see that it is the man's palm rather than his cheek he just clipped with his ankle,

though the look dissolves into a grin once fifty pounds of fur eagerly settle into his lap to lick and sniff at everything within reach.

“Good girl! Who’s a good girl?” the omega croons. Hannibal chooses not to resist the upward tug of his own lips, an occurrence that crops up more and more in Will’s presence and would astonish many of his acquaintances were any of them around to witness it.

Now and again he glances back at his traveling companions in the rearview mirror, and actually laughs under his breath when he sees that Will is play-biting with Winston just like he were one of her own species, capturing one fluffy ear loosely between his teeth until she twists her head and nips just as gently back at his scarred cheek.

Will Graham is a wild thing, impossible to fully tame no matter how his deceased mate must have tried, to hold him in check and keep him locked away in his gilded cage. Hannibal’s thoughts linger for the rest of the drive on a particular scene his mind palace had conjured up once, of the younger man running ecstatic and breathless through an impenetrable forest, naked and nymph-like with loose twigs and leaves caught carelessly in his curls, his feet bloodied by the thorns he trampled through to make his escape, a fierce grin pulling at the cut on his cheek, which is still fresh and dripping crimson that pools at the hollow of his throat and streaks further down his chest.

Hannibal would be a fool not to acknowledge how dangerous this endeavor is going to be, more dangerous than ever it was when he first began probing at Will’s mind out of curiosity. Yet he feels no fear or trepidation about his own intentions now that they have finally become clear to him.

He must have Will Graham for his own, even if doing so kills him. It just might at that, yet even that possibility is not enough to deter him from the path he has chosen. It does make him contemplative, as he would of course prefer to avoid that outcome if possible. To do so, he will need to gain a better understanding of his prey and all the variables of this game they are playing.

Not for the first time, Hannibal wonders about all of the missing moments in the Dolarhyde household that have not yet been told, leading up to the one which culminated at last in the FBI showing up at Francis and Will’s front door.

“Time for me to go, Win,” says Will none too happily when they pull up to the main entrance at Port Haven.

“I strongly suspect the two of you will be seeing each other again before long,” Hannibal hints with a loud wink.

Will laughs. “Figured you had an ulterior motive for bringing me along. As manipulation goes, I’ve never met someone as blatant and unashamed about it as you.” Still in the backseat, he scoots forward to the edge so he can place a hand on the crook of Hannibal’s arm. “Seriously though, thanks for being way better at it than most.”

“That has always been my aim,” the alpha concurs immodestly, drawing another amused snort from the omega behind him. It serves as distraction enough for the younger not to

notice that Hannibal's eyes no longer meet his in the mirror, the alpha finding himself for once the one incapable of making eye contact while the other's slender fingers still rest casually at his elbow. He is certain looking at the omega now would give far too much away.

How blind Hannibal has been until today, to have only recently become aware of the effect a simple touch could have over him.

Will waves from the front entrance and Hannibal waves back before pulling away, determined not to linger and watch as he heads inside. Winston is not so reserved, and stares out the window where her playmate was just standing. The only sounds in the car until they merge onto the highway are her low, sad whine and the click and scrape of her claws against the glass and leather upholstery of the door. Hannibal does not have the heart to tell her to lie back down.

*

"I have something super awesome to tell you now that you're back, sit down!" Abigail tells him as soon as he finds her at 'their spot' inside the greenhouse. "Oh hey, you seem like you're already in a good mood even though I haven't told you yet. Things went well with Lecter, I presume?" she follows up with in almost the same breath. Will is a little surprised she noticed given her own obvious excitement about the news she wants to share.

"Yeah. He got a dog today and took me with him to pick her up! She is so freaking fluffy and cute." Abigail *awws* at the mere mention of a dog, and it's just one of the many reasons why he loves her. They chat just about that for a few minutes before she sets them back on track.

"So even aside from getting loved to death by a whole kennel full of puppies, you'd say you enjoyed getting out and seeing the sights for a bit, wouldn't you?" she asks leadingly, and he nods in the affirmative. "How'd you like to go out on the town and do that again, say, tonight after curfew?"

"I'd say that goes against the rules, young lady, and that perhaps someone ought to inform Doctor Bloom of your illicit intentions," he answers in prim imitation of Nurse Martha. He smirks. "You telling me you found a way to bust out of here without our wardens being any the wiser?"

Her wide grin, crookedly parallel with the wicked smile stretched immortally across her neck, is the only response needed.

*

They hop over the garden wall together around midnight, in a place where the ground is a bit lower and the hollows and cracks in the wall are a bit better spaced for using as handholds. It's close to the same spot where Stammets climbed in, Will notices. When he points this out to her, she snorts and wonders aloud how they expect the patients to feel safe here with this many glaring oversights in their security.

From there, it's a quiet, companionable trek through part of the woods until they see streetlamps through the trees and know that they've reached the bus stop. The bus runs until

four-thirty and doesn't start up again until seven, Abigail informs him, so they need to be sure they're back on it by four if they want to get back before the morning staff start coming in to relieve the night nurses from their shifts.

"Where are we going first?" he asks after they're seated and the bus starts pulling forward again.

She shrugs. "I figure we stay on until one of us sees something interesting and pulls on the rope."

For all her supposed contentment with watching the city pass them by through the bus windows, Abigail is the first one to pull the rope not long into their journey. Will looks at her almost aghast when he sees the small queue lined up outside a dilapidated old gothic building with multicolored lights flashing through its windows to the beat of the loud bass they can hear even from their seats.

"What?" she asks innocently, silently daring him to refuse her this. "I always wondered what it's like to be in a nightclub. Marissa used to promise she'd take me to one before that bitch stopped taking my calls," she says, referencing her beta neighbor who had been the closest thing to a friend she'd had before she met Will.

"You're not subtle," he tells her with narrowed eyes, calling her out on the blatant manipulation tactic even as he follows her readily off the bus.

"At least I didn't buy you a puppy only to take it home with me," she responds cheekily, practically skipping in her eagerness to join the line. Will has to laugh and concede that one to her.

They don't have to wait long outside. One of the bouncers walks up and down the line, clipboard in hand, and stops at certain people now and again to wave them inside ahead of the rest. Most of them are women and omegas, so it isn't much of a surprise when he pauses his rounds at Will and Abigail next. Will can tell by the slight tightening of her smile when the man asks for their IDs that Abigail is a bit nervous now, but her hands are perfectly steady as she hands him her license.

The bouncer hands their cards back after hardly a glance, taking a moment only to stamp the back of Abigail's hand with shiny ink to denote that she is too young to order anything at the bar—*as if that will stop her from getting her hands on some alcohol if she wants,* Will thinks snidely—before waving them both inside as well.

Predictably, the bar is exactly where Abigail makes a beeline for, thankfully bypassing the writhing crowd centered on the dancefloor, at least for now. He'll need a lot more liquid courage before he can be convinced to start dancing; in all honesty, Abigail probably will as well, despite this being her idea. She may not have Will's problems, but she's still not much better than he is with crowds.

Will fishes his wallet back out, having no problem ordering for the both of them. Abigail is as much an adult as he is, arbitrary numbers aside, and he's sure as hell not gonna tell her no

like some overbearing parent. To his surprise though, she puts her hand over his and lowers it back down, shaking her head with another mischievous smirk on her lips.

“We’re *omegas,* Will,” she reminds him. “We don’t buy our own drinks. Come on, watch this!” Without waiting for him, she sidles up to the first gap at the bar she can find and immediately starts batting eyelashes at the lone alpha waiting there beside her.

“Hi,” she says simply but with a coy smirk. The guy stares at her like he can’t believe his luck for a minute before belatedly blurting out ‘hey’ back. Will almost feels sorry for the poor bastard.

“Buy me and my friend here a drink?” she asks. The man tears his eyes away from her to look Will up and down. Will forces himself not to scowl at the lascivious way the alpha’s gaze lingers over both their asses and Abigail’s chest before finally making its way back to her face, all of his shock replaced by the over-cocky swagger of an alpha who thinks he’s bagged himself *two* omegas for the night. Will no longer feels sorry for him in the least.

“Sure thing, doll, what can I get you both?” Will gruffly tells the man to get him a bourbon—if this is a preview of what the rest of their evening here will be like, he’s gonna *need* to jump straight for the hard liquor tonight—while Abigail requests a Cosmopolitan.

At Will’s curious askance look, she shrugs and tells him while the alpha is distracted with the bartender, “I saw a woman have one in a movie once and wanted to try it.” Will snorts and shakes his head at her.

“Here you are,” says the alpha once the bartender comes back, handing each of them their drinks as soon as they hit the counter.

“Thanks, bye now!” Abigail calls out brightly, grabbing Will’s free arm and heading off with him at almost a run before the guy has a chance to actually register that he’s been dumped.

The two of them are practically out of breath by the time they stop next to a not-too-crowded wall at the other end of the room, though not as much from the exertion as from the fact that neither of them can quite seem to get ahold of their giggling. “I can’t believe we just did that!” Will breathes out between pants of laughter.

“Me either!” agrees Abigail, all but cackling in her glee. “I know I made it sound like I knew what I was doing when I was all, *‘hey, watch this,’* but I’m not gonna lie, I did *not* think that would *actually work!!”* Both of them laugh all the more, looking for all the world like they’re already drunk when they haven’t even tried their drinks yet, so great is their shared mirth.

“Something else you saw on TV and wanted to try out?” Abigail nods and giggles shamelessly once more.

“Well, here’s to life lessons learned from Hollywood then. Cheers,” Will says once they’ve both regained enough composure, clinking their miraculously unspilled glasses together in a toast before each taking a sip of their ill-won gains.

The burn is a little stronger than Will remembers, having not touched the stuff often except at dinner on occasion with Francis. He sputters a bit, though not from the drink, nearly choking on laughter when he glimpses the twisted moue of disgust on Abigail's face.

"Ugh, what is *in* this?" she rasps, holding her cocktail above her head and peering up at it from below as though the angle will give her a better view as to its contents.

"Well, considering I can smell the vodka from here," Will snarks. He accepts the glass in solidarity nonetheless when she passes it to him in silent encouragement for him to try it. The look on his face is similar to her own when he pulls the glass away, stretching his left arm out to keep it as far away from his face as possible as if the beverage has personally offended him. "And triple sec," he shudders, and immediately follows it up with a fortifying gulp of his bourbon to wash out the taste.

"Can I have some of that?" she asks. He passes his own drink to her wordlessly.

Abigail takes the glass with both hands and drinks from it with her eyes closed, wincing a little at the burn yet still looking relieved to get rid of the overwhelming taste of fake orange and orange peel. "Have you ever had whiskey before?" Will asks her. Abigail nods.

"My dad kept scotch in his liquor cabinet. Marissa and I used to sneak some during sleepovers."

"There goes that name drop again. You trying to make me jealous, Hobbs?"

"Shut up," she says, elbowing him in the arm not holding a nearly full glass. "She had to spend time with me because we were neighbors and our parents were friends. It was circumstance, not choice. She made *that* very clear to the reporters who showed up at our school. I saw it on the news when I was still recouping at the general hospital."

"What a bitch," Will grouses. Abigail makes a noise of agreement with a bitter twist of her lips while she swigs down the rest of the bourbon.

"Shit, I didn't mean to finish your drink! Sorry," she says, handing the glass of half-melted ice back to him guiltily.

"S'okay, it was free anyway," he reminds her with a wink. He leans far enough to set both glasses down on a nearby standing table. "Two more bourbons?" he asks her.

Abigail shakes her head. "I think I'd better limit myself to be careful. Beer tastes better anyway." At Will's mildly inquisitive look, she adds, "My parents used to let me try some of theirs at barbeques and chili cook-offs, stuff like that."

"Mine too," says Will, fondly remembering he and his dad going to all the local fairs and free events they could every time they moved. The Grahams were never ones to skip an opportunity for free food. "Two beers then," he amends. "Wait here so I'll know where to find you."

“You should try my method,” she says, a little louder since he’s already turned and walking away.

“Not a chance!” he calls back just as cheerfully. He’s in no mood to stomach the sustained eye contact it would take to successfully flirt with someone.

It takes a little longer than he’d like to find another gap at the bar to squeeze into, and longer still he has to wait his turn to get the bartender’s attention. Long enough unfortunately for another stranger to sidle in a bit closer than necessary to his right.

“Hey there,” he pretends not to hear at first, until the stranger takes this as reason enough to lean that much further into his personal space so there can be no mistaking who he’s talking to, close enough for him to be able to scent that the man is a beta. That makes him no less reluctant to eventually turn his head and face his unwanted companion, already formulating a firm but (mostly) tactful brush-off in his head by the time he looks at him.

Pale, sharp eyes and almost militarily short brown hair atop a long, hawk-like face. Staring mainly at the man’s collar, Will imagines he can even see a hint of dark ink peeking over the edge of it on his skin.

For a second, the man’s image swims and Francis’s face becomes superimposed over it. Will’s back straightens and he swallows unconsciously, blinking to make the image go away. When he opens his eyes again, his dead lover is gone, leaving behind only the other man still staring intently at him, a thin, toothy smile on his face that Will immediately dislikes.

“Can I buy you a drink?” the man asks.

“I’m with someone,” Will says more snappishly than he originally intended. “Sorry,” he adds automatically to sooth the sting. He regrets it instantly, wishing he hadn’t given the other man the impression he felt he had anything to apologize for.

Disappointment flickers briefly over the beta’s features, but barely a millisecond later he is all smiles again. “It’s cool,” he says. “Let me buy you both a drink then, for taking up your time. My treat.” He signals the bartender over before Will can tell him no or ask him what the hell he thinks he’ll gain from this. It’s easier then just to let the guy pay and hope he can ditch him fast.

Will orders two of some random brand he remembers his dad liking, and taps his foot impatiently against the stool legs beneath him, waiting for the bartender to come back.

“I’m Matthew by the way,” says Frank’s eerie doppelganger.

Will debates the pros and cons of giving a false name before deciding that just his first name ought to be safe enough. “Will.”

The bartender returns, but unfortunately Matthew seems to already have an inkling of what Will planned to do and easily grabs both bottles by the necks with one hand, holding his own drink in his other hand and gesturing with it for Will to lead the way. The omega considers telling the other man to keep them and doing a runner anyway, but he’d just have to slink

back to order again and hope he doesn't bump into the man a second time, plus he's already been gone from Abigail for awhile and doesn't want her to start worrying. With a pinched smile, he turns and heads back the way he came.

"Welcome back, loser, what took so long—oh. *Hi,"* says Abigail, dropping from chipper to awkward in an instant upon noticing the beta trailing behind Will. She shoots her friend a confused glance, and the other omega gives her a tight-lipped smile he hopes that she'll be able to interpret correctly, but will look normal to anyone else looking. He has no idea if he's succeeded or not, however, facial expressions not being one of his strongest suits, least of all his own.

"Name's Matthew, hi," says the beta, giving the girl a crooked grin that would be near-impossible not to find charming and offering the beers in lieu of a handshake. "You must be the friend Will was telling me about." There goes the ruse Will had been hoping might hold of the 'someone' he was with being a romantic partner. He can't exactly hint that she should play along with a lie she wasn't there to see him imply earlier, and he sort of suspects it wouldn't be enough of a deterrent with this guy anyway.

"Uh, yeah, I'm Abigail," she says, grabbing one of the beers. Will may not trust his own judgement of faces all the time, but he's positive the smirk Matthew is giving him now as he offers the other beer to Will is meant to loudly and clearly read, *'Gotcha.'* Will makes certain to grasp the bottle low at its base and avoid touching the other man's fingers.

No shit, take the hint, asshole! he wants to scream, but Abigail, bless her, rescues him from having to make a scene by latching herself onto him and half-dragging him towards the crowd, insisting that they should dance now that he's back.

"You guys have a great night!" the beta calls out cheerfully with a wave, not looking the least bit perturbed by their abrupt departure. "See you around," he continues, eyes firmly affixed to Will as he says it as if Abigail does not exist.

"Jesus, I wasn't totally sure before, but now I'm positive that guy's a mega-creep," she says as soon as they're out of earshot. "Are you sure these are safe?" she asks, holding up the bottle in her hand.

"Yeah, I watched him handle them. His hands never went near the lip."

"Good," she answers, and takes a long pull from it like she needs it after what just happened. Come to think of it, she's not the only one. Will mirrors her motions almost exactly, neither of them stopping for air until the bottles are nearly halfway empty.

"Weaugh," Abigail half-breathes/half-belches out. Will would laugh if he didn't think it would come out much the same way. "Okay, I'm ready now, let's dance," she says, and slowly starts swaying with the music.

"Are we really doing this?" Will asks even as he sways along with her.

"If there's even a chance Mr. Creepy McCreepface is still watching, the last thing we want is for him to see how miserable you look right now and take that as his cue to swoop back in to

the rescue." Will immediately bares his teeth into the biggest smile he can manage without his face twitching.

"There!" she compliments with a grin of her own. "Terrible and also kind of terrifying to be honest, but y'know, 'A' for effort." He laughs, which helps to reshape his smile into a more natural one.

They keep dancing for awhile, eventually getting into it enough to find a rhythm and actually enjoy themselves, even if Abigail tells him he moves "like one of those dorky characters from LazyTown." When Will rejoins by telling her she watches too much TV, she admits that she's never actually seen the show and only knows of it from the memes. Then she gasps.

"What?" he asks wide-eyed, immediately stopping in place.

"I just realized," she says solemnly, laying one hand against his cheek. "You poor, sweet, sheltered summer child. There's six years of meme history you've completely missed out on."

Will has to clutch onto her for balance and lay his head on her shoulder from how hard he starts laughing. It's only when she starts stumbling in place from how much she's laughing as well that they decide they need to sit somewhere before they both fall down.

Will rests his hip against the first empty booth table they find and Abigail hops onto it, neither of them interested in sitting on the sticky vinyl seats stained with god knows what. Both of them relax, trying to catch their breaths and wind down. Abigail pulls the scrunchie out of her hair so she can redo the messy bun it's all but fallen out of by now. She takes her mini-scarf off next, no longer caring if anyone here notices her scar and stares at it, just wanting the uncomfortable damn thing off her sweaty skin, and ties it off instead around her bun as well.

"Well, *there* you vixens are!" says an uncomfortably close voice from their left.

"Oh, brother," Abigail groans aloud tiredly, recognizing the alpha they got their first drinks from earlier in the evening. Will, on the hand, straightens his spine rigidly, immediately noticing that the man is not only much drunker than he was before, but is also now flanked by two other males of similar size who are obviously his friends.

"That's not how I want to be greeted by you," the alpha pouts, stumbling forward.

"Steve," the friend on his right says worriedly in warning, yet does nothing to actually stop him. The other one is too busy alternating between laughing at his drunk buddy and leering at the two omegas like his friend had done earlier to help. "Are you two twins?" he asks with a disgusting shine to his eyes.

"I was hoping to find you again, angel," the first man slurs, hovering closer to Abigail inch by inch.

"Sorry, but we were just leaving," Abigail tells him, sliding off of the table.

“Oh no, I think you owe me at least a dance first,” he says, surging forward to grab her by the arm before she can back away.

Will springs into action by slamming into the alpha with the full force of his weight, using the man’s shock to immediately pin him onto the table with both hands clamped tightly around his throat. “You. Do Not. *Touch Her!”* he snarls, flecks of spittle landing on the already red-faced, choking man’s cheek.

“The fuck—get off him, you crazy bitch!” the douchey friend yells, making to take a swing at Will while the other one also rushes forward, presumably to help.

Abigail slams her empty beer bottle into the table’s edge, splintering it in two and brandishing her makeshift shiv like a sword as she steps between them and Will before they can get any closer to her friend. “Back up! *Back the fuck up!”* Both men stumble backwards with their hands up. By this point, they’ve begun to draw a few onlookers even with the dim lights and general noise of the club mostly drowning them out.

“You’re both crazy-ass bitches!” says douche-bro.

“You’re goddamn right,” Abigail tells him, a wild, elated grin spreading across her face.

“Please,” the other man pipes up again. “Just make your friend stop!”

She doesn’t need to. Will has already been loosening his grip by steady increments since the man’s face slowly started going purple, not wanting to let the bastard pass out and miss a moment of what’s been happening to him. He lets go entirely once the pleading starts and steps back, allowing the two men to rush over and help up their coughing, sputtering friend.

“Let’s get out of here,” he mutters to Abigail. With barely a nod of acknowledgement, she lowers her weapon but doesn’t drop it, the two of them quickly making their way through the sea of people and slinking out the backdoor before the bouncers have even made it over to the other three to see what the commotion is.

The two of them breathe a joint sigh of relief when they make it out into the cool night air without being stopped.

“Not so great a night then, I take it?” Will and Abigail huddle into each other even closer and turn almost as one to the sound of the all-too-familiar voice.

Matthew stands a few feet away from them, sucking on a cigarette that looks like it’s only just been lit. Will wonders how much he saw and whether he beat them out here on purpose as soon as he figured out which exit they were heading for.

“You both seem pretty shaken up,” the man carries on blithely. “I could walk you home if you like.”

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Will drawls. “We’ll manage on our own.” Abigail says nothing, though she rubs a finger over the mostly intact label on her broken bottle tellingly.

“Suit yourselves,” Matthew shrugs as if it makes no difference to him and takes another slow drag of his cigarette. He smiles then and bids them both, “Good night.”

Will nods wordlessly and guides them back onto the street, listening the entire time for footsteps following behind them and hearing nothing. Neither of them lets their guard down anyway until they are already several blocks away.

“I’m sorry,” Abigail mutters quietly after a few minutes have passed. Will stops both of them on the sidewalk and turns to look her in the eye.

“None of this is your fault,” he tells her fiercely.

“It was my idea to go in there—”

“—and we had an awesome time until those drunk assholes ruined it,” Will interrupts. “Well, they’re not going to ruin the rest of our night. Come on,” he tells her, tugging her hand to lead them past the bus stop they had been heading towards with new determination.

“You mean we’re not going back yet?” she asks. Will hates that she sounds so timid now that the adrenaline’s worn off, but he takes heart in the hopeful tinge he can also detect in her voice. It reassures him that this is the right call, that he’s on the right path to making them both forget about the mess they just went through.

“It’s not even past two yet,” he says after a quick glance at his watch. “We have a couple more hours to kill.”

Together they walk hand-in-hand, already a little more cheered than they were since leaving the nightclub.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my, look who else decided to show up 10 chapters in. Not that it could possibly mean anything, of course. ;)

And yes, next chapter includes part 2 of Will and Abigail's Crazy Night Out! I can promise there'll be a little less emphasis on the crazy though. I think. Mostly. I dunno. ¯_(ツ)_/¯

Leda Atomica

Chapter Summary

Hannibal gets cuddles. Will gets a clue. Abigail gets the popcorn.

Chapter Notes

Leda Atomica is a painting by Salvador Dalí. Remind you of another familiar painting? ;) ~~and what do you mean i play favorites with my artists, hush~~

Things that happen this chapter:

HL: I want to cuddle with the dog.
Me: You...what?
HL: *micro-smiles patiently* I'm going to cuddle the dog.
Me: *sputtering* B-but you...you're Hannibal fucking LECTER.
HL: *steely and unimpressed with my reasoning* I am cuddling the dog. I bought her for Will. Therefore her presence reminds me of him. Your opinions on the nature of my character hold no sway here. You are not, as your generation is so fond of saying, the boss of me.
Me: *giggles under the weight of a brain snapped in fucking two like a twig* Of fucking course not. My mistake. Enjoy your doggy cuddles, *sir*.
HL: I will. *he does. he somehow makes it feel canon af*
Me: What in holy hell have I done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XI. Leda Atomica

Hannibal has not retired to bed yet. Though the hour is late, or early perhaps depending on one's perspective, he has no interest in sleep and sits in contemplation in front of the fireplace, taking occasional sips of a warm brandy that works well as a nightcap on most other evenings. Winston is laid out on the couch beside him, her head resting on his lap. Every now and again, she willfully reminds him of her presence by perking her ears and gazing morosely up at him each time he pauses too long in petting her.

He had briefly toyed with the thought of forbidding her from jumping onto the furniture, even of possibly confining her to the backyard rather than get used to the idea of spending too

much time indoors, but had ultimately discarded the idea once he'd ushered her inside and allowed her to sniff around and get acquainted with the house first. The dog is either highly intelligent or has already been well-trained by a previous owner to be mindful of her surroundings and not rampage about with disregard for the fragility of human belongings. It would be unjust to treat her as though she has less of a right to comfort and ease within her own home than her master simply because she is more prone to shedding than he.

He will need to speak with a contractor soon about installing a dog flap on the backdoor so she has even freer access. She is big enough that it will need to be an electronic flap that only opens when it detects the chip embedded in her collar, despite the fact that it would be unlikely for any passers-by to see the doggy door unless they tiptoed high enough to peek into his yard over the fence. Of course, intelligent or no, he suspects it may take a bit of coaxing and training to convince the animal it is safe for use. Perhaps if it comes to that, Will, with his smaller stature, will find amusement rather than offense at being asked to assist in that matter.

The imagery this conjures is so comical and inappropriate that the usually poised and dignified alpha very nearly comes close to choking on his own drink, thankful as he sets his glass aside that it at least did not elicit a less *humorous* response from him. The idea of Will collared and crawling on the floor like a pet is too absurd and unlikely for him to find it arousing, and it additionally would be rather embarrassing at Hannibal's age to discover sexual proclivities he was not hitherto already aware of possessing.

Winston apparently misreads his jollity as distress, and sits up on her hind legs to offer comfort by licking the lower half of his face. Hannibal accepts this as graciously as the gesture deserves and waits until she is suitably distracted by vigorous rubs to the back of her ears before he discreetly turns his head to dab the excess moisture from his nose and mouth with his nightshirt-covered shoulder. It would be inconsiderate to wipe away the lingering evidence of her affections too noticeably instead of simply allowing them to dry there.

"Your concern is appreciated but unnecessary," he informs her. He does not mind overly much that the sound of his voice earns one final lick to the tip of his nose before the dog finally settles in again. Though anyone acquainted with the knowledge of his unusually sharp nose would assume otherwise, the scent of her hot canine breath does not bother him. It is wasting sickness and the unnatural cloying of antiseptic chemicals he can abide the least. For this reason, he only cleans his house and his office with organic materials such as apple cider vinegar or certain types of citrus zest.

While this means his home is already quite comfortable and not noxiously sterile like most other households, he can honestly admit to finding the smell of another warm, clean, and happy creature within it a welcome addition. It is one of the subtler and usually less conscious reasons that many people find it so comforting and therapeutic to keep pets. Humanity is a largely social species by nature after all, and while Hannibal has always preferred his solitude before meeting a certain omega, he knows that evolutionarily he is no exception.

He puts both of his arms around her, drink forgotten for the moment, and gives his left hand a rest so he can pet her with the other. Winston basks in the attention with a happy thumping of

her tail against the couch cushions. Just enough of Will Graham's scent still clings to her fur from earlier this afternoon that if he closes his eyes, he can imagine the omega sitting on the other side of her and gazing at both man and dog with fondness in his eyes.

*

"Hannibal Lec-*ter,"* Abigail enunciates clearly right up until the end, the last syllable slurring into an uncontainable belch which she covers delicately behind her hand, though it's the only courtesy she gives. They are both well beyond bothering to say *'excuse me'* to each other by this point in the evening.

"What about him?" Will asks, crushing yet another beer can in his hand and tossing it to join the rest of the growing pile on the other side of the rooftop they are illegally lounging upon. Having mutually decided they'd had enough excitement and being around other people for one night, Will had opted to buy them a six-pack from a 24-hour convenience store while Abigail waited outside and then hunted for a spot where they could drink and chat alone and still have a decent view of the city.

Abigail twists bodily around to look at him with an expression that's meant to convey *'seriously?!'* though she's honestly not surprised and trying not to laugh when all he really does is mirror it without comprehending. Their discussion has ranged throughout the night from the deep and cuttingly philosophical to the silly and absurd before drifting most recently onto the surprisingly mundane subject of *boys*—namely how much they suck, especially the ones they came across tonight, and whether or not Abigail might be ace because she's never found them or any girls interesting in *that way* or if it's more a matter of not meeting anyone who's her type yet, and what, *if anything,* could ever possibly persuade Will to give any guy a chance after Francis.

"Oh, nothing," she responds airily once she realizes, with a feeling of relish and delight that is sweetly akin to victory, that she, Abigail Hobbs, has already figured something out about the alpha that Will-*I-can-empathize-with-anyone*-fucking-Graham has not picked up on yet. "Just, y'know, wondering if you're gonna leave him hanging indefinitely or give some kind of answer to his bid to court eventually," she adds, deciding that she would be a bad friend if she didn't at least try to clue him in.

"Don't be weird, Abby. He's not..." He pauses, blinks steadily once for good measure.

When he continues to sit there for too long with that eerily blank expression that means he's thinking *way too fucking much,* she decides to prod him along more quickly by spelling aloud what he's doubtlessly been circling around dozens of times in his head already. Honestly, the boy is brilliant, but he'd probably spin uselessly on his introspective wheels forever if he didn't have her around to shake him loose from the muddied divots of his own making once in a while.

"He keeps trying to spend more and more time with you. You almost see him more often than you see *Bloom* in a single week," she states matter-of-factly. "And that's even though he *insists* he's not your psychiatrist and doesn't want you to see him that way." She pauses to let that sink in for a moment before presenting the most damning evidence of all. "He got you *a dog,* Will."

“He got himself a dog,” Will corrects automatically, though Abigail can tell by the way he shifts his eyes rapidly from side to side without looking at anything that he doesn’t fully buy it himself.

“Which you picked out and named,” she rejoins, not letting him off the hook that easily. “Did he give even a token protest to either one?” she asks, already guessing the answer.

“No,” he breathes out after giving it a moment of thought. “Fuck.” Covering one hand over his eyes, Will wonders to himself how it’s possible for him to have missed this.

“Hey, don’t leave me here!” she protests with a nudge of her elbow when Will starts withdrawing into himself again.

“Where else would I go?” he asks dryly, dropping the hand back into his lap.

As if the nudge has shaken something else loose as well, Abigail watches with fascination as something sharp-edged and cunning bleeds into his expression, brightening his eyes and curling his mouth upwards into a wily smile like rainbows in an oil spill.

Will Graham has an idea, she knows. A voice like the narrator’s from “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” repeats it back to her for effect. *Will Graham has a wonderful, awful idea.*

If Abigail Hobbs were anyone else, and not in fact the safest person on the planet from her strange friend’s peculiar brand of wrath and justice, she thinks that she would honestly be a little terrified of him right now.

“Doctor Lecter wants to court me,” he voices aloud at last. “It would be *rude* not to acknowledge it in some way, don’t you think?”

“Ever hear the saying, ‘Don’t poke a sleeping bear with a stick’?” she asks, uncertain whether the bear she just poked beside her by bringing this up or the alpha Will is already mentally sharpening his own spear for is the one to be most worried about.

Will seems not to hear her this time, too caught up in thinking of how best to exploit the apparent weakness she pointed out to him in this weird little game he and the good doctor have been playing.

“How about, ‘Those who play with fire are bound to get burnt’?” she tries again.

“He should’ve thought of that before he decided he wanted to mate *me,”* he spits more fiercely than she expects, as if *wanting him* is crime enough all on its own to warrant punishment...*oh.* Because to Will, *it is,* and that should make her feel sad for her friend, but she already knew he was just as fucked up as her from the beginning, and they’ve vowed to *own* their fucked-up-ness together and not pity each other as much as they can help it.

Besides, she understands. This isn’t just about Doctor Lecter anymore, if it ever was. This is about taking a stand. It’s about not letting another alpha have the control, and Abigail can definitely get behind that, enough to feel some of her friend’s manic enthusiasm leeching into her as well. She almost feels sorry for Doctor Lecter though. Almost.

He's a smart man after all, she reasons. A brilliant psychiatrist, if Doctor Bloom's gushing is to be believed. If he truly has no inkling of what he's getting himself into, then he clearly doesn't deserve Will anyhow.

And oddly, she thinks he might even stand a chance, if there's anyone in the world who does against a stubborn and determined Will Graham.

Not that she's going to tell Will that, of course. Some things *are* better left worked out on their own time.

Chapter End Notes

I hope the absolute *ludicrousness* that is this chapter makes up for how short it was.

Narrator Voice: *It did not, in fact, make up for it, but his readers were kind enough to pretend otherwise.*

The Dance of Albion

Chapter Notes

> Another William Blake work as the title. Tbh, don't read too much into the titles expecting them to actually reveal much about the chapters they're attached to. Think of them more as images I looked at while I was writing and thought to myself, *"Heh, mood,"* and you'll have a much better sense of how the naming convention works at this point. ¯_(ツ)_/¯

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XII. The Dance of Albion

"Nnnng, make it stopppp…" Abigail groans, burying her face against Will's chest so she no longer has to squint to avoid the rising sun, though it does nothing to block out the noise of cars passing by on their morning commute and storefront grills slamming up as the shops below open for the day.

Her pillow of choice makes a similar grumble of discontent, one hand coming up half-heartedly to hide very tired, red eyes from the light. Said pillow stiffens not a moment later though and sits up abruptly, cursing the bit of sense that returns to remind him exactly *why* awakening to a sunrise in this instance is not at all a Good Thing.

"Shit. Abigail," he says, swallowing against the dry, fuzzy feeling in his mouth and throat to try and make it go away without much success. *"Abigail,"* he says again more firmly when the girl barely stirs except to bury her face further against the crook of his arm. "Come on, we need to go."

"Nooooo, I wanna diiiiie."

"I'm sure you'll get your wish as soon as Bloom gets ahold of us," Will mutters, already far more sober than he wishes he were, the sudden awareness of where they passed out together waking him like a cold shower, or a hard slap across the face.

Turns out, it's not so smart to sneak out of an institution that's recently had a security scare just to go out and get blind drunk, especially when one of the side effects of said drunkenness is losing track of the time and napping in a careless sprawl against your best friend's shoulder on a rooftop until well past the hour for the final evening bus's departure. That and the nasty hangovers they both appear to be nursing make for a rather unpleasant start to the day already. They need to get back before Alana has time enough to *really* freak out and start tearing the city apart looking for them.

Their drop down from the rickety set of metal stairs leading up to the roof startles an employee taking trash out to the dumpster. Blinking past the blurred vision and belated sense of vertigo that hits only after his feet touch the ground, Will recognizes the familiar logo on the beta's green apron and realizes just what establishment they crashed on top of for the night.

He fishes his wallet out and after a bit of slow, careful sorting, selects one of the dozens of gift cards Doctor Bloom gave him that he has yet to make use of. "Here," he says, holding it for the still somewhat shaken and thoroughly confused-looking young man.

"Um, we're technically not open yet…"

"Look, there's fifty bucks on this thing. Just take it, or use it to ring up some stupid espresso maker or other shit for yourself, I don't fucking care, just as long as you come back out with two giant ass cups of coffee for me and my friend here."

"Oh-*kay.* Be right back." Will leans back against the wall for support as soon as he's gone and Abigail continues her pattern of leaning up against him instead.

"Here are your two Ventis," their caffeine-bearing savior returns a surprisingly short while later, though it's entirely possible both of them may have dozed off once more while waiting for him and are perhaps not the best judges of time at the moment.

"I brought sugar packets too," the guy says once Will has both cups in hand and doesn't look in danger of spilling them, digging into the front pocket of his apron to present them with a large handful of sweeteners. Abigail latches onto his lightly clenched fist perhaps a little too eagerly with both hands and sways forward a little into his space before regaining her balance.

"You are seriously a lightsaber, *thank you so much!"* she says, slurring a little, clearly either still a little drunk or simply too tired to speak with full clarity just yet.

"I think you mean life—um, I mean sure! Yeah. No problem," the guy says, a bit flustered and even stammering a little under the attention from the much nicer and—in his opinion anyway—far prettier omega.

Several gulps of piping hot caffeine and one half-stumbling, arm-in-arm walk back to the bus stop later, both of them are sufficiently coherent enough at least to discuss their likely fates upon their return to the omega facility with the calm of two resigned, long-time Death Rowers coolly discussing their future dates of execution.

"We must be two of the dumbest assholes in history," Abigail says after plopping down in her seat on the bus. Will drops just as ungracefully next to her and hums agreeably in response.

"Seriously, on a scale of one to ten, how pissed do you think she's going to be?" she asks. Will peers at her through the slit of one barely open eye over his half-full paper cup.

"Eight?" he shrugs. "Probably depends on how concerned she is right now that we went out and got ourselves murdered or raped or something."

Abigail scrunches her face at the blunt choice of wording but doesn't protest it. It's not her place to police Will's language considering…well. Considering.

When they arrive, it's to the sight of one all too familiar Bentley parked next to Alana's Prius in the parking lot. *"Ffffuck,"* Will groans aloud, hiding his face behind one hand.

"Maybe we should try to get back in the way we got out?" Abigail suggests. Waltzing in through the front door at this point does not seem somehow like the greatest move.

"And give away how we did it so they can block it off for next time? I don't think so."

Abigail shrugs. "Unless they plan to install barbed wire on top of a stone wall, I don't really see how they could manage that." She starts guiding them around to the side entrance meant for omegas not wishing to be seen going into a mental hospital in hopes that it'll be unlocked during daylight hours.

Fortunately it is. *Un*fortunately, they don't make it far down the hall before someone sees them walk in.

"Holy shit, did you guys just walk in?" Cassie Boyle asks them, sporting the largest grin Abigail's ever seen on the other girl's face. It is not a nice smile. "You two are *so* busted, bee-tee-dubs."

"Glad we can provide the high school-level drama you've been missing in your life, Boyle. Lord knows it's the only excitement you'll be getting since 'darling Nicky' is never gonna fill the empty space between your legs," Will tells her. *"Now move."*

To Abigail's surprise, instead of blowing up the way she did last time Will brought up her brother, Cassie leans forward and scrutinizes both of them more closely. "Are you fuckers hung over?" she asks, her grin only widening to downright malicious proportions. "Oh my god, this is the best fucking day of my life."

Will opens his mouth to say something else snarky about how pathetic that is, but his jaw slams closed on a wince at the incredibly loud, high-pitched noise the girl in front of them makes that's just shy of a real omegan wail and honestly more annoying than anything else. Abigail's expression is similarly pained.

"OH MY GOD, DOCTOR BLOOM! *DOCTOR BLOOM,* THEY'RE OVER HERE, I FOUND THEM!!"

The footsteps are not long in approaching afterwards, yet Cassie continues, clearly enjoying the pain her voice can inflict on both of them.

"DOCTOR BLOOM, THEY'RE HERE! THEY'VE BEEN OUT *DRINKING!!"* she screams, making sure to put as much scandalized shock into her amplified voice as she can.

"You know, you should really go back to your indoor voice," Abigail musters. From behind Cassie, they can see Doctor Bloom and Doctor Lecter now both approaching. "You're gonna burn out your lungs that way."

“DOCTOR BLOOM—”

“Yes, Cassie, I’m here. I can see that they’re back,” Alana informs the girl. Even she seems annoyed by the ruckus the other omega is making, though that’s nothing compared to the look she levels the two of them with. “You can go back to your room now if you’re done with breakfast.”

“Hope you enjoy being on lockdown for the rest of your stay here, *bitches.”*

“Cassie, *that is enough,”* Alana tells her. Hannibal stands beside her, curiously silent and stone-faced throughout.

Will opens his mouth yet a third time, presumably to make another pointed barb about the girl’s incest fantasies, but Abigail quickly clamps a hand over his mouth and urges him, *“Don’t.”* The last thing they need is to be in even more trouble, and over *Cassie fucking Boyle* of all people.

“That’s right, dog, *heel,”* Cassie adds with an ugly sneer that’s just for Will. She brushes past them when Alana says her name warningly again, making sure to knock into Will’s shoulder hard with her own, and with minimal effort spent towards making it look like an accident.

Hannibal reacts for the first time once she leaves, reaching over to pluck invisible lint from Will’s shoulder. “Alana, perhaps we should move to your office before another one of your patients shows up to sling abuse at them?”

“I agree,” she says and starts walking that way, an authority to her step that signifies she expects to be followed without question. “I’ll call Jack when we get there and let him know he can call off the search.”

“You got Agent Crawford involved?” Abigail asks the older woman, nearly running in her hurry to catch up with her, aghast.

“I got anyone involved who might have the faintest clue where you two might have gone.”

“And you thought *Crawford* made sense to be on that list?” Will remarks dryly, he and Hannibal following behind at a more languid pace. He isn’t nearly as bothered by Bloom’s bad cop routine, it having been too many years since he was that awkward teen under his teachers’ and foster parents’ thumbs.

Alana doesn’t respond and her expression doesn’t change, clearly in too foul of a mood even to appreciate a good ribbing at the BSU director’s expense.

Hannibal has no such inhibitions and allows the tiniest smirk to grace his lips briefly while Alana isn’t looking, a look passing between him and Will as though they are sharing a secret. He must have finally met the man this morning then and agreed that he didn’t exactly measure up to expectations.

Will blinks, remembering the revelation he had thanks to Abigail last night, and analyzes the tightened, fluttery feeling in his own chest as the other man looks away again. He puts it

down to relief that the alpha doesn't seem put off or upset about the situation as Alana does, since that could mean losing the advantage he has in this game almost as soon as he's learned about it.

On the contrary, now that he's paying attention, he sees that Hannibal is as placid as ever while Alana exudes the kind of stern anger borne out of fear for her charges and what could have happened while they were out unsupervised. It's oddly refreshing to know that at least one of them trusts Will and Abigail to be out on their own without getting hurt. He just hopes neither of them finds out about the bar fight or else Doctor Bloom really will be likely to put them both under lock and key from now on.

"I am shocked," she says quietly once they are safely cloistered in her office, the call to Crawford being made by one of her receptionists so she can focus on her patients unhindered. "Shocked and disappointed by you both, but especially by you, Will. Did you really take Abigail out *drinking* last night?" she asks.

"It was my idea, Doctor Bloom," Abigail interjects.

"That's hardly the point, Abigail," Alana adds wearily.

"Why? Just because I'm younger, I'm not capable of making my own decisions?"

"It's not about that. You could have gotten yourselves in a lot of trouble if the wrong authorities caught you. You could have gotten in a lot worse trouble if someone *other* than the authorities found you in that state. After what just happened with Eldon Stammets, I can't believe you would put yourselves at risk like this!"

"After what happened with Stammets, I can't believe you think being stuck in here is any safer than being out there," Will points out, only a little surprised at the venom in his own voice. It's a low blow, one that he can see land its mark behind Alana's eyes though she's able to keep from flinching.

"It *is* safer, and with better security measures being put in place, it'll be even more so." Will scoffs and turns his head away, disgusted. Abigail's expression is less than impressed as well.

"If I may, security does not seem to truly be the issue at hand here," Hannibal suggests, *and okay wow,* Will had no idea Bloom was capable of looking at Lecter with anything less than pure admiration and damn near hero worship in her eyes. Clearly *no one* is safe from her ire today.

"If not, then pray tell, what is it about?" she asks.

Hannibal bows his head, demure and unassuming, deferential even, and Will wonders not for the first time how he manages to make it look so convincing. "I merely wish to suggest that as this situation arose from what I assume to be a feeling of lack in their own personal agency and freedom, what would benefit Abigail and Will most in their therapy is more leeway, not less."

Alana stares ahead as if someone just stepped up from behind and dumped an entire bucket of ice down the back of her dress. Abigail looks similarly stunned but recovers more quickly to stammer, “Um, yeah. What…what he just said. You need to let us out more, Doctor Bloom!”

Alana sighs and looks down, and Will knows in that moment that Lecter has already won. It never ceases to amaze him how easy her own little crush on the alpha makes it to manipulate her. It’s not even limited to just Hannibal directly—all Will has to do half the time when he really wants something is namedrop the other man and he’s pretty much set.

“It’s not that simple…” she tries her best to protest anyway.

“I will, of course, defer to your judgment on how well supervised these excursions out should be,” Hannibal demurs.

Oh, Will thinks. *So that’s his game.* He should have known right away. Trust Lecter not to play anything by half-measures.

“As a matter of fact, there is a performance by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra scheduled a few weeks from now. I imagine you would agree it’s a far more culturally stimulating way to spend one’s evening out than simply drunkenly carousing about town for a night,” he adds with an amused twinkle behind his smirk. “Perhaps the four of us could attend together? Under the right circumstances, it can be perfectly safe and even healthy for all of us to let our hair down every once in a while.”

Were it not for the fact that it would ruin the carefully crafted illusion Hannibal has been building up for his target audience of one, Will would slow clap for the man’s own brilliantly executed performance. He wonders if everything he’s told Abigail about Lecter up to this point is enough to allow her to see through the veil as well.

“I’ll think about it,” Alana says, the only person in the room who remains unaware that her answer is already as good as a yes.

After they are allowed back to their own rooms, Abigail corners Will in his just so she can tell him, “I take back what I said last night. If these are the kind of benefits having a psychiatrist with a massive crush on you brings, I am *so* on board now.”

Will shoos her out so he can crash on his own bed in peace at last.

The last thing he thinks about before he succumbs to exhaustion is less about what other benefits he can milk out of this, and more about how much more he can get away with while pressing the other man’s buttons.

Chapter End Notes

Just want to put it out there that despite how it may seem, I don't necessarily believe Alana is "easily taken in" or lacking in backbone. Remember that on the show even Will

bought into a lot of Hannibal's bullshit in s1; the only ones who really had an inkling something was up with that guy were Bedelia and Abigail, two people who have already dealt with a lot of personal trauma beforehand, *some of which they know for a fact Hannibal caused directly.*

Will's increased wariness in this fic is also a direct result of his own past trauma. He's not smarter than show!Will either, he's just more woke (and even he obviously still doesn't have this It-Fucking-Rhymes-With-Cannibal guy completely figured out yet either). Idk, just something I felt like mentioning because I know we all tend to give characters a lot of flak for their lack of situational awareness much of the time, myself included. :\

Two Beings (The Lonely Ones)

Chapter Notes

> From the work by Edvard Munch. (And this one really does work thematically with the chapter, if you ask me.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XIII. Two Beings (The Lonely Ones)

Abigail has to take back one of her previous assertions. There's one thing she hates about living at Port Haven more than group—it's the fact that most of the omegas have been here long enough for their cycles to sync up. A huge percentage of the population here goes into heat all at once, leading to a few extra tired bags under the eyes of the efficient beta nurses and orderlies who now have to cater to a ward full of girls and boys all suffering under flu-like symptoms, juggle paperwork and transports for the ones going home temporarily or to special heat service facilities to ride it out there, and pry apart hormonal patients seeking comfort in each other because apparently *that's* against the rules for some ridiculous reason Abigail doesn't pretend to understand, all while being understaffed as more than a couple of the omegan workers have called in at the same time since their heats have hit as well.

She and Will are both immune as newer arrivals whose bodies are still used to their old heat schedules, which is nice in that it means the staff pays less attention to them than normal while their focus is elsewhere. She just hopes neither of them ends up staying here long enough for their cycles to adapt and match up with the others' as well.

It does mean she has to field Bloom's super awkward questions about what accommodations she might need once it's her turn, since the topic is somewhat unavoidable these days. Abigail is normally adept at avoiding the conversation, despite knowing that it'll have to come up sooner or later, but the doctor isn't letting her off the hook that easily this time.

"I've never been mated, so I don't need anything. Really."

"Many of the girls here are unmated, Abigail," Alana explains with a patient smile on her face. "There's no shame in requesting surrogacy services or implements if you want them. This is about your comfort."

"Well, I'm…not comfortable with the idea of a surrogate. I've never needed one before either. Honestly, I'll be fine!" Abigail says earnestly. At least Doctor Bloom doesn't look ready to argue, which is a huge relief.

“It’s not like it affects me the same as the rest anyway.” At this, Bloom’s gaze shifts into something more curious and encouraging, but she doesn’t press for the girl to say more than she’s ready to discuss. That’s one thing she really likes about Doctor Bloom’s therapy style.

“I mean, I get the sweating and the shivers and all that gross annoying stuff, but it doesn’t ever make me feel…” she shrugs.

“Arousal?” Bloom asks. Abigail blushes but nods anyway.

“I even went to school when the symptoms were light!” she adds, not sure why it sounds like she’s trying to convince Alana or even what she’s trying to convince her of. “Not that most of the teachers or administration liked it. They thought I was too much of a ‘distraction’ to the alphas, but it’s not like they could actually do anything about it. Anyway, none of them ever affected me, and there were only one or two idiots who sniffed around me more than I was comfortable, but even they weren’t dumb or out-of-control enough to actually try anything either.”

“The systems we have in place often don’t give individuals enough credit for their own agency or actions,” Alana agrees. “Especially where alphas and omegas are concerned.”

“You don’t let many alphas except for Doctor Lecter wander around here on their own either,” Abigail points out.

“That’s for the comfort of the patients here. Some of them can become quite distressed at the mere presence of an alpha.”

“There aren’t a lot of guys on staff either, not even beta ones. I think there are only like three omegan boys here too, including Will.”

“That’s true. While in the latter case, it’s simply a matter of there not being as many male omegas as there are female ones, you’re right to point out that it’s not a coincidence most of the staff here are women.”

“Because men are bastards?” Abigail asks.

Alana laughs with genuine mirth. “Sometimes.”

“But not Doctor Lecter, right?”

“He would be the exception,” Doctor Bloom agrees fondly. Abigail almost feels guilty for bringing him up, considering what she knows, but certainly not enough to say anything.

“We’ll have to take you and Will out shopping soon. You both need something to wear for the symphony,” Bloom continues.

“Sounds like fun. Be a good way to use those gift cards you gave us.” The two of them exchange a soft smile and then wrap up their session for lunch.

Will is far less enthused and actually pulls a face when she tells him about the shopping trip Bloom has planned over their Salisbury steaks.

“Come on, you never went out and had a mall day with your friends from school?”

“I never had friends in school,” Will points out. “Dad and I bought most of our clothes at thrift stores and K-Mart.”

“Well, you’ll have me there, so it won’t be all bad,” she promises. “By the way, did Bloom ask about preparations for your heat too?”

“Yeah, it’s coming up but I told her I’d need to think about it. There’s still time.”

“Mine’s a way’s off, but I’ve already decided I don’t want anything special. Just to be left alone.”

Will nods along, not surprised. “My dad used to sing to me on the bad nights.”

“Really? That’s so sweet. My mom was similar. She’d stay up and watch movies with me when I was too restless to sleep.” She pauses, the nostalgic smile fading slowly from her face as she adds, “My dad would always leave.”

Will looks up from his plate at her. She swallows, despite not having taken another bite. “He’d go on a hunting trip by himself and stay in the cabin. Wouldn’t come home for at least a week, not til it was long over.” She doesn’t realize she’s gripping her fork too tightly until Will strokes the back of her hand to loosen it.

“What was your mate like during heats?” she blurts out, unthinking, just needing some quid pro quo to latch onto to escape her own painful reminiscences. She regrets the words as soon as they’re out of her mouth, however, immediately aware that she’s overstepped.

The hand on hers stops stroking, not withdrawing right away, but it isn’t until she dares look up and sees the curiously blank, hunted expression staring back at her forehead that it occurs to her that had anyone else asked that question, they would have likely gotten a fist through their teeth for the trouble.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “Shit, I’m *really* sorry. That was way out of line. I shouldn’t have —” He shushes her without making any noise, just a shake of his head and a silencing gesture with the hand that was just on hers a second ago.

‘It’s fine,’ he mouths, hand still raised and head tilted at the table between them with closed eyes, a surer sign than anything else that it is definitely *not* fine. Seeing it makes her want to cry.

He resumes eating after a minute, right as one of the nurses starts glancing their way more, and she does the same. The nurse looks away again soon after, but Will and Abigail continue to finish their meal in silence.

Afterwards, he grabs her by the hand and walks her back to his room. Once the door shuts behind them, he pulls her into a fierce hug and whispers, “It really is okay. I’m not mad at you, I promise. I just…I can’t talk about this stuff out there.” He sits down at the foot of the bed and Abigail follows, sitting beside him.

“Frank was…most of the time, he was really gentle. *So* gentle. I thought sometimes if I touched him he would melt like sugar in rain. On sunny days, we’d lay outside on the grass. I picked wildflowers and he’d…” He huffs a little laugh to himself, an easy smile on his face at the memory. “He let me put them in his hair sometimes, when it’d been too long since he’d cut it. If not, I’d twist them into crowns and put them on his head anyway.” He smiles at Abigail’s slightly disbelieving laugh. “I wish I had a picture of him like that to show you. It was really adorable.”

His expression smooths out and becomes serious again once he continues. “When my heats came, and his ruts, he was…very different. He was already too serious all the time, but at those times he was serious and *hard.* It was like staring a stone gargoyle in the face right before it broke open, and once it did break open, the thing that came out with scrabbling talons and snapping jaws was something *primal.* Ruthless.”

He keeps his eyes down, focused on his hands in his lap. “It was a lot like the way he was when he came home from his *long weekend trips.”* He smirks wryly and glances up to see Abigail focused on him intently.

“There’s more,” he tells her suddenly, feeling emboldened. “You see, he also liked to record what he did on those trips so he could watch them again later. He needed it sometimes to be able to…” he trails off, clears his throat. He feels Abigail stiffen beside him slightly, already able to tell where he’s going with this. “I couldn’t look away,” he finishes, swallowing.

She reaches over to grasp one of his hands with one of her own. It makes him feel disingenuous, like he’s taking sympathy he doesn’t deserve, so he keeps going. “They weren’t the only videos he made me watch.” He refuses to look up now until he’s said it all, not wanting to lose his nerve. “There were other videos. *Before* videos. Happy couples on vacation and happy families at home.”

The hand around his own tightens and doesn’t go anywhere. He starts talking faster. “We’d watch and we’d discuss floor plans, yard visibility, proximity of the neighbors. I’d point out weak spots he’d missed, faulty locks and windows, that sort of thing.” He smiles fiercely, an ugly rictus of a grin. “Back when it was still only couples who reminded me of the Marlowes, it was even sort of…enjoyable.”

“I helped him pick them, Abigail,” he confesses to her entirely. “And plan them.”

“Did he ever take you with him?” Abigail asks.

Will shakes his head rapidly. “I was never allowed to leave the property,” he answers, deeply bitter about the fact still and not bothering to hide it. “Not once.”

Abigail nods understandingly. “Dad wouldn’t take me along on the hunts either.” Will looks up at her sharply. “I guess he was afraid of what he might do if I was there for that part,” she carries on blithely. “I didn’t really want to go, but I kind of resented that I wasn’t allowed to either. We used to do everything together.” There’s bitterness in her tone as well. Will stares at her, slightly awed.

She turns her head to gaze steadily back at him and says, “I was the bait. I’d lure those girls, talk to them, find out where they were going and where they lived, when they would be alone.” She blinks back a bit of mist in her eyes and offers him a wobbly smile. “I knew he was feeding them to us too. So. Nice try, but you’re not going to scare me off that easily. Because we’re just alike.”

If it wasn’t entirely too much physical contact for one day for him already, Will would hug the daylights out of her again. Instead, he tightens his grip on her hand even harder and she does the same, until they’re both at risk of losing circulation and going purple.

They sit together like that for a long while, just holding hands, two peas in a pod.

*

Chapter End Notes

More Will and Abigail interaction for you! They'll start branching out to talk to Hannibal and other characters more soon enough though. ;)

Sacred and Profane Love

Chapter Notes

From the Titian painting.

Heads up for flashbacks to rape, abuse, and other traumas this chapter. I know you all know to expect it from this story by now, but I try to give a little warning whenever it gets heavy on those themes again all the same.

My dudes, I started work on *a completely different chapter* before I got stuck on it and realized the reason was because I needed to change the order of certain events I had planned and push that one back. *Then* a certain sassy omega by the name of Will Graham saw what I had drafted for this one, laughed and said, "Yeah, no, I don't think so, have you MET me?" and proceeded to do what he wanted instead...some of which was almost the OPPOSITE of what I had planned and caused ripple effects on how I'm going to have to write future chapters! :0

"I could never entirely predict you, Will. I could whisper into the chrysalis, but what emerges is something entirely beyond me." Damn, I know how you feel now, Hannibal. Me too. Me fucking too. xD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XIV. Sacred and Profane Love

Will's heat rolls in, slowly at first, then suddenly, all at once, an unrecognizable force after more than half a decade of having an alpha at his side to weather the storm with him. It *hurts,* meals lurching rebelliously in his stomach, skin clammy and hair damp with sweat. He'd forgotten how awful it felt like this, with nothing to distract from the jagged, squeezing cramps of a torso screeching in impotent rage for the absence of a womb to fill.

Abigail visits and even tries awkwardly at times to soothe with little pats on the head and scenting around the wrists, the door always open on orders from the suspicious nurses who don't believe her when she assures them there's nothing *funny* or in any way inappropriate going on when their backs are turned. Will is grateful for her company but sometimes wishes she would leave him alone more so that they would too.

It all comes to a head on his first night alone in full-blown sickness. The shadows on the walls twist into thick, twining arms and hungry mouths. He writhes and throws the covers off, his skin crawling with every brush of his soft pajama pants as if they were leaving invisible scratches in their wake. It is a thousand times worse than any flu. There's screaming in his head, screaming that gives way to the blaring siren of a home burglar alarm, to the

creak of a stair beneath an unsteady foot, to the howls of a creature more alpha than man, more *beastly,* and the scent of blood, so much blood…

He drowns under the suffocating weight of nearly half a dozen pairs of arms, the burn in his legs and his lungs the only indication given to his brain that he's been running, fast and *hard,* like there was a monster at his heels, and he wants to cry because they're too many and because they're the *wrong arms*—thank god, thank god they're wrong, thank god they're *not wings*—and then with the sharp prick of a needle his entire body goes slack.

The last and only thing he sees clearly are a sea of white-clad shoulders, above those a pair of almost motherly eyes and a worried frown, and he thinks of how that's wrong too, that Mrs. Marlow never looked at him that way while she was alive and was certainly even less sympathetic after she died. Then the haze of red shadows suspended on dust fades and everything tilts sharply into black.

*

Alana is mostly silent as she sits across from him in her office, her only words since their initial morning greetings a brief explanation to fill in the gaps he doesn't remember from the night before, how he had run through the halls and tried to escape in only a semi-conscious state. She knows that Will hears her but there is no reaction, barely a blip of recognition even as phrases like "PTSD" and "flashback" pass tentatively between them. He is, if anything, less responsive to her than ever before.

It's understandable yet it still frustrates her to no end, and she hates herself a little for it. Maybe more than just a little. Where does all her patience go where Will is concerned, she wonders bitterly. It's times like these Will's empathy seems almost to be a living, two-pronged entity of fragility and spite, and the closer one gets the harder it is not to be affected by it.

"Tell me what you need, Will."

"Isn't it supposed to be your job to figure that out," he retorts, the words themselves sharp but lacking the usual bite his voice would lend them, coming out more tired than anything else. They sting nonetheless. More so, really, if she's being entirely honest with herself, because doesn't that just highlight how true they are?

The instinct is there to defend herself, to equivocate with a line that wouldn't be entirely off-base about it being her job to help *him* figure it out, but what comes out instead is, "I honestly don't know how helpful I can be to you, Will."

Will finally looks up at her, close enough to eye contact that she might have inwardly crowed with victory in any other circumstance. "You giving up on me, Doctor Bloom?" His expression is unreadable to her.

For someone who feels so much from everyone, whose emotions should bleed messily and all over the place, he is oftentimes fairly inscrutable when he wants to be. Some days it strikes her as a habit he picked up from Abigail, other times it's the other way around. It even reminds her in the smallest of measures sometimes of Hannibal, and in the rarest tics of all

she occasionally sees herself. So many of Will's quirks and tells, even cadences of speech, are made up of a patchwork of others that it's impossible to tell where he really stands.

"Never," she promises him firmly. She ducks her head. "As hard as it is for me to admit though," she breathes out on a sigh. "I'm considering whether it would be best to refer you officially to Doctor Lecter."

"Don't do that," he responds immediately.

"Why not?" Nothing in Will's attitude suggests that she has reason to be concerned, but she has to be sure, of course. "I thought you two had a good rapport?" she ventures.

Will looks amused by that, likely because he understands where the question comes from. "The *rapport* is that he doesn't talk to me the way a psychiatrist does."

Her former mentor has always been fond of the more unorthodox methods, though she respects and trusts him all the same even if she doesn't follow in his footsteps. There's more however to Will's statement that he's silently asking her to understand—there nearly always is, she's learned, though she's not sure how aware of it he is himself, the quiet plea for someone to climb over his walls and *see.*

She's been trying desperately to do just that since they met, but each time she stumbles, loses her footing, and curses her own ineptitude more and more with every attempt. She wants so badly to see, but Will is just as determined to keep others blind as he is hopeful that someone will survive the climb anyway.

"Are you saying you wish I'd talk to you less like a psychiatrist as well?" she asks even though all of her training warns against it.

She wishes Will would look at her again, instead of glancing away at his hands loosely clasped in his lap. "Well, it'd be an improvement to you trying to pry my head open like an unruly can of tuna." It's meant as a joke, but she winces all the same.

"It's never my intention to make you feel like tuna," she quips back, masking it.

"I know," he responds as seriously as the statement deserves, not-quite-forgiveness for a not-quite-apology. "S'it okay if I go back to my room now?" he asks, allowing his exhaustion to show as he stretches. At her nod he leaves, skipping breakfast to find his head where he left it back on his pillow.

His stomach gurgles a few hours later to rebuke him for it, waking to the smell of something rich, gamey, and…*minty?*

Will sits up, eyes half-slitted open, and makes a sound between a scoff and a grumble at the sight of *Hannibal Lecter* busying himself over a heated bag and setting the little table for two.

"I have been terribly remiss not to prepare a meal for us to share before now," Lecter says as casually as if Will hadn't only just woken up and he were merely picking up the thread mid-

conversation, “but the opportunity has not presented itself prior to today.” He waits for Will to stand and wobble groggily over to the table before continuing. “Silkie chicken in a broth. A black boned bird prized in China for its medicinal value since the seventh century. With wolfberries, ginseng, ginger, red dates, and star anise.”

“You broke into my room to feed me chicken soup?” Will asks dryly, swallowing down a bite without waiting for the other man to start. Damn. It’s good. Really good. He should have expected, considering the hobby has come up in conversation before and anyone else who brings up the subject of Lecter’s cooking does nothing but rave about it. There’s meat besides chicken floating in it as well—pork fat, he guesses. Whatever it is does an excellent job of enhancing the flavor.

“I called ahead,” Hannibal refutes. “Alana was reluctant to allow me at first. She mentioned only that you’d had a troubled night’s sleep.” He glances over at Will pointedly as he pours tea for them both as well before starting on his own soup. “The nurses say you’ve been wandering, Will,” he adds, revealing unashamedly that he has other sources of gossip when Alana’s professional decorum won’t allow her to speak freely.

“Is that what they’re calling it,” Will snorts. He spares a glance long enough to note that the door has indeed been left ajar, though not as widely as it is when Abigail drops in, and there are no nurses lingering outside it to breach their privacy. He bets it annoys the other omega that they trust an alpha whose intentions for Will really are less than innocent more than they do her. Which prompts Will to wonder, just how is the alpha holding up in a mostly closed-off room with an omega in heat, one he so happens to be attracted to no less?

The answer is apparent when he spots the barely-there sheen of mentholatum ointment under the man’s nose and in places where his own scent would emanate most strongly—at his wrists, behind his ears, and the pulse point along his neck. That would explain the mint Will noticed. The omega rolls his eyes a bit. He just bets the man would have taken care to season the soup with ingredients that would complement it best instead of clashing, because *of course* he would.

“That their idea or yours?” he asks, tone snide, miming rubbing his finger under his own nose.

“It has the effect of putting others with stricter points of view regarding heat etiquette more at ease,” Hannibal confesses.

“Translation—you didn’t think they would let you through without it.”

“In truth, there is far less need for such measures than polite society has trained itself to believe, much to its own detriment. Too many alphas use biology as an excuse to justify actions they could easily have avoided had they only been willing to exercise self-control, or at the least been held more accountable for the lack of it.”

Will slurps his soup quietly for a few more minutes, until the silence becomes almost too much to bear. “That meant as a jab?”

“I suspect lack of accountability was not one of the Dragon’s troubles.” Hannibal calmly sips his tea.

“No,” Will agrees, thinking of long-ago nightmares not his own—*“Do you want Grandmother to cut it off, Francis? I swear to God, you little beast, I’ll cut it right off!”*—“Steps were…taken in his childhood to ensure that would never be a problem. Though they may have had the opposite effect than what was intended.”

“Have any problems yourself, Will?” Hannibal asks in what can only be called a *teasing* manner.

Will puts a hand to his chest in a dramatic *‘Who, me?’* gesture. *“No,”* he drawls. Perish the thought, surely.

“Of course not,” the older man agrees with a smirk. “You and I are just alike in that regard. Problem free.” Will snorts some more at that utterly ridiculous assertion. It should feel awful, shouldn’t it, to banter like this after discussing his dead mate? Yet there is no topic too sacred or profane for one of them to bring up, even for both of them to find humor in, it would seem.

Their conversation drifts naturally toward “safer” topics—subjects such as the upcoming concert, how Winston is doing, that sort of thing—without the strain of feeling forced or uninteresting. They could be discussing carpet patterns and it would likely be much the same.

Hannibal leans forward to refill Will’s teacup. Some of the mentholatum must have rubbed off on his sleeve while he was eating, because underneath Will can detect a hint of the alpha’s natural musk now. Unconsciously, he leans in to sniff, his foot tapping an uneven rhythm that makes his thigh jiggle, and lets out a soft, barely audible purr.

He jerks back in his seat immediately upon realizing it, face flushed. Hannibal’s own reaction is to widen his eyes slightly before slowly retracting his arm, the only hint of emotionality he allows to pass through.

“Nothing to be embarrassed about, Will,” he reassures.

“Fuck you,” Will growls defensively in response, going from mortified to furious in a split second, though more with himself than with Lecter. He squirms, that scent lingering in his nose and activating centers in his brain which had been dormant for this heat until now. *Fuck.* He breathes in shallowly. He’d better not start producing slick just because of this or there will be *hell to pay.* “I swear to god, if you did that on purpose…”

“I assure you, Will, I did not.” He sounds honestly contrite, and very good at hiding the bit of smug pride that Will *knows* he must be feeling in spite of that. After all, even if it is a far, *far* cry from actual explicit consent, being able to trigger this particular response in an omega in heat is still a decent indicator of the *potential* for good sexual compatibility and mutual attraction.

It’s something to be taken as a compliment rather than consent, of course—no one is such a slave to their heats or ruts that consent is implicit without a clear and wholehearted *yes,* no matter what assholes may try to say otherwise.

(Will has never forgotten this. He remembers what his father and every teacher worth their salt had told him since before he hit puberty. *He knows.* He knows this as surely as he knows that he did love Francis, and that Francis loved him.)

(It is a too-simple lie, to say that a man like Francis Dolarhyde is incapable of love. He *did* love. His Love was terrible and burning. Consuming. Unquenchable, and as unstable as the man himself was.)

(Will holds no delusions about this. He could never afford them. So he loved back with all that he had, and he waited. If you don't adapt, you're breakfast. If you don't adapt, you are Changed.)

(Will adapted.)

"I do feel partially responsible, however unintentional," Lecter says. *There's the smugness,* Will thinks, *you bastard.* "If there is anything I can do to help…" he stops when Will looks up at him expectantly. It's difficult to read when the man emotes almost entirely in microexpressions, but Will thinks he might actually be a little embarrassed. Well perhaps not quite that, but nearly, or else trying to appear so. With Lecter it could easily be the latter. "… My apologies, Will," he backpedals a bit. "I did not think about how that would sound."

"What, so you weren't offering your *services?"* Will snarks.

"It would be a little untoward, given our current relationship," Lecter answers in all seriousness.

"Well, now you're just being a tease," Will drawls lightly. Hannibal smirks as much in amusement as he does, but Will is positive he spots something else lurking behind the man's eyes at his words.

Oh, I've got you, Will thinks, triumphant. He's so glad Abigail helped him to see it, though he would have caught on sooner or later. This is going to be *such fun.*

"If you require it, it's not too late to seek professional assistance. There are a number of trusted heat service programs in the Baltimore area I'm certain Doctor Bloom keeps on retainer for her patients."

Okay, that suggestion Will does not expect, throwing him for a loop which leaves him second-guessing. "You think I should?" he asks, watching the man's face carefully.

"Sex can be therapeutic and an excellent reliever of stress in ordinary circumstances, far more so when that stress is in part due to the physical discomfort and frustration caused by heats," the alpha recites clinically, his expression giving nothing away.

Will can't be sure if Hannibal is issuing some kind of challenge, attempting reverse psychology or a double bluff on him, or genuinely trying to help him by offering practical medical advice. It's entirely possible as well that he's gauging Will's reaction to determine if he has hang-ups about the idea out of lingering loyalty to Francis.

“Maybe I will give it a go then,” Will says with the air of a man admitting to his opponent, *‘You win this round.’* He’ll have to do better next time, perhaps even figure out a way to spin this into an advantage that lets him regain the upper hand. He already misses those quick peeks of insight into Hannibal’s psyche from before, the man’s person suit too well-stitched once more by the end of their lunch to reveal anything.

Although, it occurs to Will after Hannibal departs, that in itself might be a tell all its own.

*

He second-guesses himself again, torn between morbid amusement and distaste, when he goes to a heat clinic the next afternoon and the staff-person tasked to help him select a partner from their pool of volunteers hands him *a menu* of beta men to choose from. For one, it’s grossly sexist to accept applications only from one very specific gender out of over a dozen. (There are clinics which have started to hire genderless, genderfluid, and trans people on the condition that they have penises, but that condition is yet another facet of the systematic flaws that still exist in standard screening procedures.) For another, *it’s a fucking menu.* A menu with handwritten answers next to a bunch of generic questions because “some omegas like to get a feel for their personalities that way” apparently, but a menu nonetheless.

Alright, they’d called the binder a “portrait catalog featuring profile highlights on available volunteers,” but that’s not much better. Catalogs should be how people without internet order themselves fancy winter coats, not pick a person to sleep with in order to make a superfluous biological function more bearable. He supposes it’s better than them throwing random guys at him like darts until one of them makes him wet. Jesus, it’s embarrassing though.

He wonders now if the psychiatrist’s suggestion wasn’t a sadistic joke in disguise. He had to know enough about the protocol as a doctor to realize that Will would hate this. Maybe it’s a long game to chase Will eagerly into his arms just to avoid ever going through it again.

At this point, Will’s only flipping through it and pretending to give each page more than a passing glance to humor them for taking time out of their schedule to help him, because he’s eighty percent sure he doesn’t want to do this anymore. His brief flare of libido since yesterday has already faded back into the usual grungy, tired feeling and, to be honest, he’s not really interested in revving it up again. He can just go back to Port Haven and make dumb jokes with Abigail about the whole situation, maybe even make a blanket nest to ride the rest of it out in just for the hell of it.

He turns another page in the binder and freezes. Matthew Brown’s face smirks up at him on the next one, and curiosity makes him linger long enough to actually read the man’s profile. “Orderly at Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane” is written in neat, blocky writing next to “OCCUPATION.” He can’t imagine that’s much of a turn-on for most omegas and wonders if Brown wrote it out fully where an acronym or just “Orderly” would have sufficed on purpose, effectively filtering out the ones who would be put off by it.

A curious move when most would spin their answers in the most positive light to maximize their own appeal and put potential clients more at ease.

“You like that one?” the clinic rep asks kindly.

Like is a rather strong word, he wants to snark in response, but the rep has done nothing to earn his sass, and contrary to the general opinion that Will Graham doesn't have a polite bone in his body, he does possess enough manners not to harass an employee just trying to do their job. So instead, after a moment's consideration, he just nods.

*

Forty minutes later—after the representative verbally reads a lengthy disclaimer to remind Will, among other things, that he and his heat partner both have the right to end the session at any time for any reason, and that they are required under penalty of law to use the protection provided as failure to do so would result in a fine of no more than $5,000 against them both—Will is led into a small room not unlike the ones doctors use for consultation visits, but with a full size bed instead of a narrow exam table and a door to the right which presumably houses the shower and toilet. After another brief wait alone—this one only a few minutes—Matthew Brown enters the room and shuts the door behind him.

No surprise registers on Brown's face—which makes sense as he would obviously have been briefed on who requested him before agreeing to the session in the first place—but a lop-sided grin slowly unfurls as he takes the sight of Will in. "Hey there," he greets like an old familiar friend.

Will, sitting on one of the cheap, plastic cafeteria-style chairs fully clothed and decidedly *not* in the pepto pink hospital gown still folded neatly at the foot of the bed, returns a personable but less *intimately* voiced welcome. "Hi Matthew."

The silence drags on after that as Will realizes he has *no fucking clue* what to say next, having not thought this through far enough ahead, though Matthew seems not to mind. The purposeful way Matthew starts walking toward him, however, is enough to make Will stiffen and find his words. "I didn't actually come here for *that,"* he says quickly.

The beta's hand drops back to his side after coming only a hairsbreadth from touching Will's shoulder, and instead he grabs the chair next to Will's and pulls it around to sit across from him as if that was his intention all along. He's still close enough that their knees could almost be touching, and Will makes a conscious effort to sit still and not scoot his own seat further back.

"What did you want to see me for then?"

There are a few approaches Will could take here. He could lie, say something flirtatious to stroke his ego, but he decides instead to go with simple and honest. "I was curious."

The beta's expression lights up, almost preening, letting Will know that he made the right choice, that the simple, unfiltered fact of the omega's attention is more valuable to him than false flattery. "About?" he asks.

Will shrugs. "You. This," he says, gesturing the room around them.

"My volunteer work?" Matthew leans back in his chair, smirking. "Can't I just be a humanitarian who likes helping people in need?"

“Definitely not,” Will retorts automatically.

The beta grins delightedly and Will watches, fascinated, as that morphs flawlessly into a leer and Brown leans forward again, closer than before. “Maybe I just like getting my pick of pretty little omegas to squirm around my dick whenever I want,” he breathes, clearly trying to rile Will up.

“Come on, Matthew,” Will says with a coy smirk of his own, hoping nothing in his face or his voice belies the way his stomach *roils,* “Don’t sell yourself so short. We both know it’s not really about the sex.”

Will has never seen someone look so gleeful at being caught in a lie. Matthew tilts his head, hawk-like. “Tell me what it is about then,” he says, the breathiness in his voice no longer put-on.

“Power,” Will answers simply because, really, it’s obvious. “Power over them which they give to you freely. You’d never hurt them, of course. That’s not the point, and you know enough not to shit where you eat even if your urges ran that way. No, they always leave after seeing you happy and satisfied,” Will tells him sweetly. “But,” he pauses to lean away under the guise of relaxing further in his seat, playful smile still affixed, “it can’t just be any old sweet, weak-willed, pretty little thing because where’s the fun in that? You need someone who wants to be held down, truly wants what you’re offering. Someone to catch at least a glimpse of what’s lurking beneath and *crave* it.”

Of course, a run-of-the-mill dominance kink is not what makes Will’s spine prickle with unease every time he looks at the man, nor does Will find anything wrong with it in itself. The problem is that it’s a very good front for what else the man is hiding, something the omegas he sleeps with never see and which ultimately leaves Matthew unfulfilled and dissatisfied, eternally looking for someone to match what he’s actually looking for and coming up empty.

Brown lets out another long breath and leans back in his own chair. “You know, for someone who didn’t come here looking for *that,”* he parrots Will’s words back with a mocking lilt, “you sure have a way with words that could make a man forget himself if you’re not careful.”

For an instant, Will has a flash to the rough burn of carpeted stairs digging into his back, crushing, heaving weight looming above, teeth dripping and red with his own blood and the glean of fanatical adoration in his newly-formed mate’s eyes. His fingers curl painfully around the uncomfortable armrests and he looks away for a moment, swallowing. He unconsciously displays the scar of his old claiming bite when he turns his head, bringing a sneer to the other man’s lips, jealous and hungry.

Will turns back to the beta and narrows his eyes, remembering something. “You sought me out at the bar, even though your usual MO is to let someone come to you. Why?”

“Guess I just saw something in you that made me realize I knew exactly what you were looking for.”

“No, you didn’t,” Will assures him, cynical and flat.

“Really, Will Graham?” Brown asks, sly, the too-familiar tone returning as he says his name. “All anyone need do is look at you to figure out what you’ve been missing,” he says, gaze flickering between the scars on Will’s face and neck.

“You’ve been reading Freddie Lounds,” Will sneers, understanding prickling at the back of his neck and causing the hairs to stand on end. Brown laughs, expression caught. “You know, you really shouldn’t take anything she says to heart. Most of what she writes is garbage.”

Brown glances at the floor, still smiling. “Ah…it wasn’t Lounds actually,” he confesses, looking back up at Will. “It was my boss.”

Will’s brows furrow together in suspicion. “The…director? At BSHCI?” he asks confusedly.

“He has not shut up about you since the FBI found you,” Brown informs him, lips twisted in unkind amusement. It’s clear the man has little respect for his employer. “Especially since that incident with the, um, the mushroom guy?”

“Eldon Stammets,” Will says. Matthew shrugs, the name obviously making no difference to him one way or another.

“He was pissed when they gave you over to Bloom instead of him,” he carries on gleefully. Will’s stomach drops, both at the revelation that the director of the Baltimore State Hospital for *the Criminally Insane* thinks he belongs there more than at Port Haven, and the admittance that Matthew knows far more about Will’s situation than he’d previously let on. “Thinks getting the chance to study you would really make his career.”

All of this is too much new information to process right now. Will needs to get home and have a chance to think and regroup. He still feels sick from his heat as well, though it’s hard to separate out what’s caused by that or the rolling nausea he’s felt since soon after Matthew walked in.

He jolts when fingers brush back one of his curls, no longer damp but a little oily from earlier sweating. *“Don’t touch me,”* he snarls, recoiling from Brown’s hand.

“You’re awfully tense, omega. Sure you don’t want me to help you with that before you go?” Matthew asks solicitously.

“More than sure,” Will snaps, destroying any remaining pretense the beta might have been laboring under that Will could ever possibly want anything to do with him.

Matthew takes it in stride, eyes dancing with mirth rather than the sting of rejection. Will regrets ever setting up this little meeting, certain now that it’s only fanned the flames of something he hadn’t known had already been burning at Matthew’s core since before the two of them even met.

Will gets out of there as quickly as he can without causing a commotion at the front desk soon after, the memory of Matthew’s smirking gaze as he walked out following him. He wants a shower so he can scrub away all the grime just from being in the same room with the creep. He wants fervently never to see Matthew Brown again in this lifetime or the next.

He has the sinking suspicion that he should be so lucky. When has Will Graham’s luck ever panned out how he wants it?

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, Will, it's not like you made things any easier on yourself rewriting this damn chapter for me. Just sayin'.

The Swallow's Tail

Chapter Notes

Another Salvador Dalí painting for you.

I've cleaned up the tags for this fic (since they were getting WAY out of hand) and added a few new ones which I'd forgotten to include before as they cover something that hasn't been specifically addressed in-fic so far (yep, astoundingly, not even in those otherwise rather explicit sex scenes. I checked! I know, it surprised me too :0).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XV. The Swallow's Tail

“How about this one?” Abigail asks, twirling around to give Doctor Bloom a better look.

“Oh, that’s adorable! In a very mature way, of course,” Alana amends with a soft, amused clearing of her throat at the mock-annoyed look Abigail throws her for the first comment. The dress is a deep wine shade of purple, like a smoky Shiraz, with a mini Princess-cut skirt that brushes just past her knees and puffy Queen Anne style sleeves. It really is a rather cute dress, with the color doing most of the work to give a touch more mature elegance to its look.

“You don’t think it’s a little too casual? I wanted to pick something I could wear again later, but most of the stuff here looks like it would be out of place anywhere except at prom.”

“It’s actually the perfect cocktail dress for this kind of occasion. Most of the ladies who’ll be attending will want to save their mermaid gowns for opening night at the opera,” Alana assures her with a bare teasing smile. “Plus, that color looks great on you.”

“Thanks,” says Abigail shyly. “I have a hard time telling what’s supposed to be the ‘right’ level of classy for something like this.” She puts her hands on her hips, looking down to think to herself for a moment, and then nods once decisively. “Okay. This is the one. I’m going to change back now and meet up with you at the cashier’s.”

“Alright. Afterwards, we can stop by the makeup counter if you want for tips. They might even throw in a free makeover to demonstrate what goes best with your dress if we buy something.”

“Sounds great, I’ll meet you over there!” Humming to herself a bit, she pops back into the dressing room to change back into her blouse and skinny jeans. This honestly has been more fun than she anticipated. Even though she wouldn’t say she cares all that much about fashion most of the time, it’s nice to get to be girly with someone once in a while.

Idly, she wonders if Will is at least wringing some fun out of looking at suits with Doctor Lecter on the other side of the store.

*

At first, Will has trouble feeling anything but dour about the whole situation when Abigail and Alana go off on their own and leave him alone with Lecter at the men's half of the department store…until he realizes this presents him with the perfect opportunity to ruffle the alpha's feathers without Bloom's notice or interference.

It helps too that Hannibal seems to enjoy being there about as much as Will does. If anything, it makes him almost gleeful as he thinks about what he can do while they're there to make Hannibal feel even more put-upon.

"I'd've thought for sure you'd love this part," Will needles, making a show of holding up the sleeve of a truly hideous tweed jacket within reach as if admiring it. "Finally, a chance to dress me up like you've always wanted."

He realizes quickly the reason he isn't getting the reaction he wants is because Hannibal is too busy giving the *exact* expression he hoped for to a display for a discount suit proudly proclaiming itself to be "40% off!!" in bold red lettering. God forbid the man ever set foot inside a Wal-Mart if this is the level of disdain he holds for the merchandise in a moderately well-kept and put-together formal clothing store.

"I admit this is not the shop I would have chosen were it up to me. I would have preferred to take you and Abigail to a proper tailor, but Doctor Bloom was fairly insistent and gave this… establishment almost a glowing recommendation." Lecter's tone says he is calling his colleague's tastes into rather serious doubt now. He might have known half of the man's distaste would come from buying anything for this affair directly off the rack.

"Well, this one's not *too* bad," Will says, reaching for the suit Hannibal had been fixated on in such morbid disgust. The alpha's fingers dart to catch around his wrist urgently, as if Will were about to put his hand in toxic sludge.

"While the quality here in general may leave a lot to be desired, we can still do better than that," Lecter intones seriously.

Will bites his lip to hold back a giggle, fairly certain it would be pushing his luck a little too far if he were to laugh at the man outright, but quirks a deeply amused brow and waggles his fingers when the alpha continues to hold on for a moment longer than necessary without letting go. The man releases his grip, but not without returning the look with one of his own which says there will be *consequences* if Will dares try to pick that abomination again. Will is tempted to find out just what those consequences may be, but he pulls his arm back and allows himself instead to be steered in the direction of more suitable attire hanging far, far away from any clearance racks.

"Just don't forget, I am here on a budget," he says, patting the pocket where Bloom's gift card, already separated out from the rest of the cards in his wallet, resides. A crease comes

between Hannibal's brows; at first Will isn't sure what it means, but then decides he must be having an internal debate of some kind.

"Trying to think of how you can offer to pay for mine and Abigail's stuff without stepping on Doctor Bloom's toes?" he guesses. The slight smile Lecter gives him borders just short of wry, telling him he'd guessed right.

"There is always next time," the alpha concedes.

"You're awfully damn sure there'll be a next time," Will mutters, accepting the outfits Hannibal passes to him to try with a sardonic look of his own. "We haven't even gone yet. Don't get ahead of yourself. For all you know, this could be as much a disaster as your last big idea." Too late, he realizes what he let slip and his mouth thins into a narrow, self-reproving line, annoyed with himself. He turns away and relaxes his face again before Lecter can see it.

"My last big idea?" It doesn't take long for the psychiatrist to figure out what he means. "Did something happen at the clinic, Will?" he asks. He seems genuinely concerned about this too, damn him.

"No. I suppose 'disaster' might have been a touch dramatic." It's not *technically* a lie, he reasons. All he and Matthew did was talk for Pete's sake. This gives him an idea, however.

"The guy they paired me with was certainly intriguing," Will tells him with a vague smile, giving nothing away. "It's just too bad he didn't *quite* satisfy that itch." He deliberately doesn't look at the other man as he adds, "Guess he wasn't what I was looking for in a bedmate after all."

Hannibal makes a diffident sound of acknowledgement, having no apparent comment to give otherwise. But Will, watching carefully out of the corner of his eye, doesn't miss the way his fingers tighten just minutely in the fabric of another article of clothing before he continues browsing through the racks.

"Oh well," Will exhales on a lofty sigh. He looks up, deliberate in the way he does make eye contact this time, and says, "Next time, right?"

Smile just shy of coquettish, he slings the suits he's been holding behind his back, and while he doesn't quite flounce—he can say with confidence that he has likely never, not even once in his life, *flounced*—to the dressing rooms, he does walk there with a sense of victory that threatens to transform his smirk into a cruel grin as he feels the other man's eyes burn a hole into his back.

*

Will Graham is toying with him.

He knows this with as much certainty as he knows that he is not the only one who has sensed the potential of a true equal to partner with, whether Graham acknowledges it yet or not. The omega he has chosen is a stubborn creature, courting chase for the sake of their game but not

with intent to be caught, liable to turn around and bite the hand that reaches for him the moment it gets too close. How fortunate then, that Hannibal does not mind the possibility of gaining a few new scars. For what is he to do, other than to give the boy exactly what he wants?

Hope is a cruel thing, and Will Graham infinitely crueler. It is part of his equally infinite charm.

*

"Wow," Will says when Abigail and Alana walk out of her office together later that evening. "You guys look…wow."

"You don't clean up half bad yourself," Abigail teases, poking him in the center of his chest with her finger. Just for that, he reaches as if he intends to pluck out one of the carefully placed black rhinestones in her loose bun. *"Quiiiiiit,"* she warbles, dodging away from his hand at the last minute. "You'll mess it up!"

"Settle down, children," Alana says, a light grin on her expertly colored lips further brightening her already lovely face. Her own hair is down in gentle waves around her face and her dress is a deep sapphire blue that catches and sparkles in the light of her dangling earrings and her wide blue eyes. She is, in a word, *stunning,* and Will suspects that had his proclivities run in that direction he would not have been able to look away.

"No tie?" she asks him, lips still tilted upward so that it's apparent there's no disapproval in her question. He shrugs.

"Y'all did say we wouldn't have to be that formal."

The three of them stand outside to wait, Hannibal driving up in his Bentley to pick them up soon after. The alpha gets out of his car to hold the doors open for them, backseat for Will and Abigail, front passenger side for Alana. Will doesn't fail to notice that his gaze lingers on Will's open collar as he slides in, eyes glittering almost as imperceptibly as the pearl-snap buttons of Will's shirt which Hannibal only regrets could not be actual pearls.

Will buries the thrum of pleasure that suggests *relief* that the other man's stare is not similarly beholden to Alana's appearance.

"I almost wish Cassie were around just to see us so she could eat crow," Abigail says gleefully as they slip on their seatbelts and pull away. Alana sighs a little but she looks like she's trying to hide a smile of her own.

"Who?" Hannibal asks in a tone that suggests mild confusion without looking away from the road.

"The girl who was so eager to *inform* me of Will and Abigail's return after their little escapade," the older woman explains wryly.

“She hasn’t been back since she left during Hell Week,” Will adds, referring to the unofficial title most of the nurses and patients use to describe that window of time when most of the omegas with their synced-up cycles go into heat at the same time, although they tend to be more careful about not using it within Doctor Bloom’s earshot. The not-quite smile or frown Alana wears when Will mentions it indicates she is already well-aware of the nickname anyway.

“Her parents were pleased with how well she seemed to handle herself at home and decided to withdraw her permanently,” she responds neutrally, careful not to reveal her own beliefs on the matter.

“You mean she managed to refrain from throwing herself at sweet Nicky boy? They’re right, that *is* impressive,” Will drawls. “Unless, of course, he wasn’t around for her heat, in which case they’ve just decided that’s a more elegant solution than spending thousands of dollars keeping them apart all fifty-two weeks of the year.”

“Can we please not talk about this?” Alana asks tightly, even as Abigail snickers. “I swear, you two are more interested in gossiping about other people’s therapies than you are in focusing on your own.”

“Alana,” Hannibal says with a light smile of his own as if to chide *‘let them have their fun.’* She relents with another wry grin, eyes all for him. To the passive onlooker, they could be a married couple taking their 2.5 kids for a pleasant evening out. Francis would think so, Will thinks, imagining it as if his late alpha were in the dark of that car with them, looking on in jealous lust and clenching his jaw like a hungry dog.

“You okay?” Abigail asks quietly while Bloom is distracted by something else she and Hannibal are discussing. Will nods tacitly without looking forward at either of them. Hannibal glances back at him through the rearview mirror before returning his own response to Alana.

Hannibal slides smoothly out of his seat once they arrive at the concert hall to pass his keys to the valet and opens the doors for them again. Alana and Abigail both step out on the right side, but Will stubbornly opens his own door to get out on the left, even if it means stepping out onto the road and taking longer to go around to the sidewalk.

Hannibal meets him at the curb and offers his arm. Will nearly gapes at the forwardness of the gesture. What would Bloom in all her wary concerns for Will and shy, private hopes for Lecter make of it? He cranes a little to look and realizes the man has cleverly gotten Alana to link similarly with Abigail and walk on ahead—the two of them laughing and chatting in a way that again would allow them to pass for mother and daughter—so to her it won’t look the same as it will appear to everyone else when Hannibal Lecter, eligible alpha bachelor, strolls proudly into the building with an omega at his side.

“Oh, you’re a talented fucker, I’ll grant you that,” Will mutters for his benefit, the other man leaning his head intimately towards Will’s to listen. He feels the other man’s quiet chuckling as puffs of warm, delighted breath against his face and neck.

There isn't much time to mingle before the show, for which Will is grateful; he's already noticed a few socialites around eyeing Lecter surreptitiously as if they cannot wait to latch on and find out what he thinks of the performance during intermission. Only one brave soul ventures close to him now, a striking older brunette with a bob cut and a scintillatingly mauve cocktail dress that makes her look like a more mature but no less marvelously frivolous version of Gatsby's Daisy.

"Hannibal!" she greets with warmth and brilliancy. There is an air of cleverness to her that Daisy Buchanan certainly lacks in her depictions as well. Hannibal releases Will's arm only then to exchange air kisses with her. The skin through his sleeve tingles at the loss.

"Will, this is Francine Komeda," the doctor introduces them. "Mrs. Komeda, may I introduce you to Will Graham, Abigail Hobbs, and I believe you already know Alana Bloom here," he continues as the latter two join them.

"Yes, how are you, dear?" Mrs. Komeda says, taking one of Alana's hands with both of her own and exchanging more air kisses. Will is glad he and Abigail are spared the somewhat embarrassing gesture as new acquaintances.

"I must say, it is a bit *curious,"* here, her eyes seem to sparkle with an almost mischievous glint which Hannibal returns with an indulgent smirk, "but supremely delightful nonetheless to see you in attendance with company for once."

That word, *company,* appears to fill the whole of her mouth with its shape like a rich dark chocolate, the crunch and pop of which against her teeth seems to satisfy as fully as its smooth sweetness. She is careful in the way her gaze sweeps across all three of Hannibal's guests to include all of them in it, but it rests last and longest on the infinitesimal gap of space between Will and Hannibal, who have not moved to put further distance between them yet since they stopped walking.

"Hannibal invited the three of us out," Alana confirms. "It was a wonderful suggestion. It really has been too long since any of us have been able to go out for something fun and enjoy ourselves."

"Some of us longer than others," Abigail agrees with a significant glance at Will, who resists the urge to do anything childish like lightly step on her foot or stick his tongue out at her.

"I'm glad. The four of you out together though, why, it's practically a party! Although," the older omega adds with a loaded glance at Hannibal, "I suspect he won't be cooking properly for you like one."

"On the contrary, Mrs. Komeda," Hannibal refutes. "I will certainly be providing dinner for us at my home after the performance has ended."

"I said *properly,* Hannibal," Mrs. Komeda ripostes with both hands on her hips. "As in dinner and a show. It's a performance in its own right."

"So, you're really that great a chef, huh?" Abigail asks the man curiously.

“He is,” Will answers for him. “It’s pretty annoying actually.” Hannibal appears shamelessly pleased by that comment while Alana huffs out a surprised laugh and swats Will’s arm lightly with her program in chiding amusement.

Komeda’s own smirk glitters with hidden depths as she glances between Hannibal and Will again. She seems about to say something but changes her mind on it at the last second. “Alana darling, how long has it been since Hannibal put on one of his dinner parties for us?” she turns to the other woman to ask instead as a shift in topic.

“Too long,” Alana replies with an amused twinkle that suggests she’s giving exactly the answer she knows Mrs. Komeda wants to hear.

“Far too long,” Komeda agrees with practiced elegance. It’s apparent she’s made this particular opinion known more than once before in Hannibal’s presence.

“One must wait for inspiration to strike,” Hannibal retaliates, clearly enjoying their verbal spar as much as she. “The feast must present itself. It cannot be forced.”

“It’s dinner, Hannibal, not a unicorn. But I suppose I’ll forgive you,” she says. Hannibal seems almost surprised. “As long as you *promise* this inspiration you’re holding out for will be something magnificent worth celebrating.” Her gaze flickers briefly to the gap between their arms again, so quickly Will isn’t sure he’s not misinterpreting it.

“I assure you I won’t settle for anything less,” Hannibal promises. Will is left with the disorienting impression that he’s missed something vital just now.

The lights dim to signal the concert is starting soon. Mrs. Komeda excuses herself then to allow the five of them to make their way to their seats.

*

The music is lovely, he’ll give it that, but Will also has to admit that he simply *doesn’t get it.* His enjoyment of playing the piano does not translate into a deeper appreciation for live symphony, it would seem.

He tries not to fidget much beyond the arrhythmic tapping of his fingers against his knee—he gave up on stopping himself from doing *that much* maybe twenty minutes in. He lets the orchestra play as the backdrop against which his own thoughts shift and reorganize themselves, finding it useful for that much at least but wondering if that’s what he’s *supposed* to be getting out of it or if there’s something more he’s missing.

He tries looking to Alana and Abigail for clues, but he can’t find their faces in the dark. When he turns to Hannibal instead, however, his breath catches in his throat. He *can* see the man’s eyes gazing fixedly ahead at the musicians on stage, though it takes him a few moments to realize this is because they are glistening with unshed tears.

Hannibal is transfixed by the performance. Will is transfixed by Hannibal’s reaction to it.

Both of their gazes remain firmly affixed without wavering, Will wondering if it's truly possible for Hannibal to not notice he's being stared at and a little awed by it. His fingers have ceased tapping, but they curl and fan outward against his thigh in timing with every crest and swell of the symphonic movement he's forgotten entirely about.

They are among the first to stand and applaud once it's over, though Will has little idea what he's applauding for other than the zinging energy that races through his arms compelling him to do it. He is *still* staring when Hannibal looks back at him finally and asks if he enjoyed the performance. Will nods.

Only when Hannibal breaks eye contact to usher them out to the lounge is Will able to turn his head away finally, rolling his neck to work out the kink from keeping it held to the side for so long.

Alana and Abigail excuse themselves to go powder their noses. Hannibal offers to fetch them drinks and leaves Will to stand alone next to a pillar away from the crowd, perhaps sensing that the omega would appreciate a quiet moment alone to his thoughts. He feels curiously buoyant and empty all at once.

Another man makes his way out of the crowd to stand near the same wall, a sway to his step which makes it apparent the flute of champagne in his hand is far from his first, or likely even his second or third. The man doesn't notice Will right away, but once he realizes he's not alone, he takes in the young omega's appearance with a long, slow blink and says apropos of nothing, "Well, you're a pretty one, aren't you?"

Will doesn't quite have his capacity for speech back yet after earlier, so he keeps a disinterested gaze forward, somewhere vaguely within and above the crowd, and pretends not to hear.

"Sure," the man says in agreement with himself, conversationally as if quite used to being met with silence and no longer bothered by it. "Sure. Pretty enough. Still. Not so pretty you shouldn't count yourself lucky not to have been born back in the quote unquote *good old days,"* the man sneers. Will blinks, brows furrowed, and shifts his head to watch the strange man finally out of the corner of his eye. The other man is emboldened by this.

"They ever teach you what they used to do to, to pretty omega boys like you at school?" he stutters and slurs more animatedly. They did, and now that Will's aware of where he's going with this he'd rather not hear about it again, but he doesn't have his words back yet and is disinclined to move since he was here *first.* "They'd have stuffed you into a dress, made you into something you're *not."*

The man's words are bubbling with indignant frustration, though not on behalf of the omegas who went through this in the past, but rather against them as though they were somehow complicit in their own misgendering. "Like one of, one of *those,"* he says, pointing, and Will's own anger and indignation is *entirely* on behalf of whomever the rude pointing and ruder words are for even before he sees that it's Mrs. Komeda. In the absence of his voice, Will's fingers curl with the desire to tear into the man with his hands instead.

“Douglas, how are you? Enjoying the show, I trust.” The drunk man drops his hand and pales, apparently surprised and visibly shaken to find that his pointing has summoned the woman herself. “Cat got your tongue, dear?” she asks solicitously. ‘Douglas’ only sputters and stares for a moment longer before muttering a quick, flustered *‘excuse me’* and quickly scampering off with his tail between his legs. She watches him go with an arch smile.

“Douglas Wilson. He’s a trombonist for the orchestra, but his performances have taken such a dive recently that he’s little more than a benchwarmer for them these days,” she confides to Will. “You mustn’t take anything he says to heart. He’s bitter and prone to all manner of stupidity when he’s been at his cups for a while, which lately is *always.”*

“He…he said…” Will’s tongue is still a bit quiet and halting, which frustrates him, but at least he is finding his voice again with a little effort.

“I know, darling. You don’t have to tell me,” she says. “He hasn’t been invited to another Christmas party of mine in over twelve years. Not since my sweet Albert, God rest him, threw him quite literally out into the snow for the same misinformed ramblings,” she adds, her smile turning to one of fond reminiscence, presumably at the mention of her late husband. “And they *are* misinformed, let me assure you before you get it into your head to worry about me for sillier reasons. It’s true, the name on my birth certificate used to be ‘Gerald’ and I’ve never seen a reason to hide that fact from anyone. But,” here her grin widens and she throws in a wink for good measure. “No one ever shoved *me* into a dress that wasn’t of my own design and choosing,” she says.

“I believe it,” Will tells her honestly.

Hannibal returns shortly with a greeting for Mrs. Komeda and a glass of champagne for Will. “Was that a member of the orchestra you were speaking to just now?” Typical that nothing like that would get past him even from the line at the bar halfway across the room.

“Not one worth listening to,” Will notes snidely, and mimics Hannibal’s movements in the way he sips his champagne.

“I must return to my own companions for the evening again,” Mrs. Komeda says and gracefully takes her leave of them for the second time. Will and Hannibal are left alone once more to await their remaining companions’ return from the long queue at the powder room.

“You were very quiet earlier,” Hannibal remarks. So he had noticed.

“Mm. S’pose so. I do that sometimes,” Will deflects, not wanting to go into it further and admit there might have been something particular behind his withdrawal, something he doesn’t have a name for. He watches the bubbles streaming upwards in his glass contemplatively.

“Don’t go inside again, Will.” Will blinks up at his companion, startled by the unexpected urgency of the request. Something very subtle and indefinable has begun to shift between the two of them tonight, here as they stand apart in their own little bubble of reality amidst a sea of faces. “You’ll want to retreat. I’m asking you not to.” The other man takes almost an

imperceptibly tiny step closer, and yet everything within Will screams at him to back up, even as it demands just as loudly that he not, that he do *anything* but that. “Stay with me.”

“Where else would I go?” he asks before he can hold the words back, an echo of something he said to someone else not so long ago, but under wholly different circumstances so that if feels like something entirely new to utter them now.

Lecter has no answer to that. The moment stretches between them, long and uncomfortable, until Alana’s voice politely calls them to attention from some small distance away. With hesitation in his eyes which only Will can see, Hannibal turns away from him to welcome Alana and Abigail back upon their timely return before the next curtain call.

As the lights begin to dim once more, Will downs the last of his champagne.

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Lecter’s home is a curious mixture of the exotic and the familiar, old world charm and expensive curios thrown in beside vibrant feathers and creeping antlers which would not have looked out of place in Abigail’s old house in Minnesota. She likes it, and she is unnerved by it. She thinks this must be Will’s first visit too, and that they should compare notes on it later when he’s not being so weird.

The clever thing about always being a little weird is that it’s harder for others to tell the difference between the “usual” weird and the unusual, not without knowing that person really, really well. Doctor Bloom doesn’t notice anything especially weird about Will. Abigail does. She doesn’t know Doctor Lecter as well, as perhaps no one does, but based on only her observations of her best friend, she’d guess that something must have happened between them in those few minutes she and Bloom were gone. She’d also guess that whatever is going on, her friend will be, in true Will Graham fashion, as ridiculous and impossible about it as he can be.

Abigail is unconcerned about this. Will will figure Will out on his own terms, and he knows she’ll be around to act as a sounding board if need be. The depth of their connection is one that has allowed her to get to know herself better as well. For instance, she feels no pressure to poke or prod heedlessly, no desire to do anything more than simply enjoy her night and make her own private observations unhindered by obligation to do anything with them outside of immediate needs, or what she wants, or what Will asks.

This is one reason, layered upon a multitude of many which make up the essence of who Abigail Hobbs is, that she is able to ignore the automatic impulse to seek eye contact when she takes a bite of their first course, a refreshing spring salad topped with thick slices of glazed ham, and tastes that it is not really ham at all.

She pauses mid-bite, unnoticed by the woman across from her or the boy beside her still engaged in a conversation which no longer holds her attention. She chews. *Swallows.* Only then does she allow herself to look up.

Doctor Lecter is looking right back. He smiles, a genuine smile with real warmth and eye crinkles. It’s timed perfectly so that it coincides with some witty observation Doctor Bloom is

making about the event they attended, but Abigail knows it's for her. Abigail does not smile back, but neither does she frown, or look back in disapproval or fear, or in anything other than blank curiosity and quiet confirmation of her knowledge.

He looks away from her first, and everything about his posture is relaxed. Content and pleased as a happy little duckling. *Trusting.* She relaxes too.

She looks back down at her own plate, and takes another bite.

Chapter End Notes

Well, now things are *finally* starting to get interesting. ;)

The Wound Man

Chapter Notes

> Reasons for the chapter title should be rather obvious, I would think. :P There's a lot of versions to choose from, so take your pick.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XVI. The Wound Man

It is one of Doctor Bloom's busiest class days, when she will be at Quantico for most of the morning and early afternoon. Jack Crawford is grateful for the rather fortuitous coincidence —it means the beta won't be around to rain steely disapproval down on his head and try to stand in his way when he shows up at Port Haven to do what he has to do. A quick flash of his badge and an *'I won't brook any nonsense'* attitude at the receptionist's desk are all that he needs to get the job done.

"Let's go, Graham," he says the moment the boy is brought up front after he's done signing him out. "Taking you on a field trip."

"Where to?" Graham asks, trailing after him unhesitatingly despite having no idea what's going on, sure footed. Crawford could use more like him out on the field, people who don't waste any of his time; his own agents can even try his patience in situations such as these.

"Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane." At this, the boy does hesitate briefly, one foot hovering uncertainly for a moment before he finishes that step and keeps moving forward, a shadow passing over his face before it is just as quickly gone. It is enough to make Jack feel an extra stab of guilt, this reminder that not everyone is used to trudging through the dross of humanity as he is, and Will is so young.

'Too young,' some would say, and *'Hasn't he been through enough?'* some others. To which Jack would answer *yes,* and again *yes, more than,* but this has to be done. He needs someone who can see in ways no one else can, and Jack knows he is too close to this himself to be objective. He allows that knowledge to shore up his resolve. *This has to be done.*

"Know anything about a killer called the Chesapeake Ripper?" he asks as they get back into his car and buckle in. Will shakes his head. It's just as well. He can take an unbiased look and tell Jack what he thinks without any preconceived notions clouding his view. Afterwards, Jack will let him look over the Ripper's file and build up the rest of his profile from there.

He fills him in on only the most pertinent details to the situation at hand. "The Ripper killed some folks and displayed them in elaborate ways before he went to ground about two years

ago. This morning, I got a call from the chief of staff at BSHCI that one of the inmates there murdered a nurse in a manner that matches some of the hallmarks of one of those killings."

"Don't tell me anything more right now," Will says, almost brusque. He's had the same thought that Jack has about keeping him free from bias until he's seen it for himself. Jack spares him an approving nod before returning his attention to the road.

They don't speak again until they pull into the parking lot outside of the hospital. Once there, Jack pauses in cutting the engine and drops his hand away from the ignition, turning partway in his seat toward the younger man sitting beside him. "Doctor Bloom doesn't want you looking at anything like this," he says. "No one can blame her for that. I certainly can't. This kind of thing…well, it can get under your skin if you let it. And you've already had more than your fair share of dealing with this kind of ugliness before." The boy twitches at that but doesn't say anything. "More than anyone has a right to ask you to bear witness to again. But I am. Asking."

Will turns his head in his direction, keeping a steady gaze on Jack's shoulder. "You look, you tell me what you see, and if you need to go, we'll go," the alpha continues. "Doctor Bloom is worried I'll break you, Will, but I think you're stronger than that. You're tougher than anyone else realizes."

Graham offers him eye contact then, briefly, before it flickers away again in a rapid blink like the flutter of fairy's wings, gone with a quivering smile and a nod. He's unbuckled from his seat and out of the car almost before the engine's rumble has reached its end when Jack cuts it.

Will stares up at the stone edifice of the entrance, imperious and slate grey as a fortress, though one designed to keep prisoners in rather than invaders out. *Dramatic,* he thinks, and isn't sure if he means the building itself or the slant of his own thoughts. Bit of both perhaps. He's sure, however, that Crawford has no intention of leaving him here. Not today, at least.

The bold, glossy letters spelling out "VISITOR" on the badges they pin to him and Crawford at sign-in are possibly more reassuring than he cares to admit.

"Agent Crawford, so good to see you again. Unfortunate circumstances aside, of course." The man who steps forward to greet them is dressed in a sharp grey suit, hair coiffed and beard carefully trimmed and groomed. Will thinks the look he is trying to pull off is one of timeless sophistication, but what comes more readily to mind is the oil-slick shine of a used car salesman.

The two exchange handshakes and a few polite words of familiarity, and then the bearded man shifts his attention to Will in a way that is tempered to appear as if he were only just now taking notice of the fact that he has another visitor, an affectation that is ruined by the avid gleam of his gaze. "And this must be the famous Will Graham I've heard so much about." Will represses the shudder that hearing his name come out of that spit-slicked mouth brings.

Jack introduces the beta man to him as Dr. Frederick Chilton, director and chief of staff at the hospital, as if Will had not already gathered as much quite easily by himself.

“Lots of talk about you in psychiatric circles of late, Mr. Graham,” the beta says almost as if he expects Will to take that as a *compliment.*

“Oh yeah?” Will humors him with a sharp-edged smile.

“Yes,” Chilton reaffirms, clearly choosing to ignore the obvious sarcasm. “Everyone is dying to know about the young omega who lived under the Tooth Fairy’s thumb and stayed remarkably intact all those years, especially since it’s come to light what a useful and fascinating talent you have.”

Will can feel and hear the click of his own teeth as he bites back the automatic urge to correct, *“the Great Red Dragon’s thumb,”* not wanting to have that particular impulse analyzed by either man present.

“He’s not here to be studied, Doctor,” Jack tells the other man pointedly.

“But that is why you’ve brought him here, is it not? To put his unique talent to use,” Chilton counters, apparently past bothering to disguise his obvious interest.

“Doctor Chilton,” Jack says, this time in warning. Will is almost surprised to look inside himself and find a bit of gratitude there for it.

Dr. Chilton makes a show of dropping the subject, *for now,* and leads them to the room where the crime took place. He puts on a grandiose speech about the “gruesome” and “chilling” nature of the scene more with the air of a teleplay narrator than that of a man mourning the loss of life of one of his own employees. Will shoots Crawford a look behind the beta’s back, and Crawford returns it, a tentative camaraderie between them in their shared disdain.

That look falls away when the door opens, and Will finds himself in the same room as a corpse for the first time in six years. (He is not, in this moment, taking into account the body that fell at his feet some months prior, brains spattered on the wall behind him, which had only seconds before it fell been his mate and the only human contact he had known throughout those long, terrible years. Some days it seems a mercy that the abrupt dissolution of their bond brought with it only one intense moment of noise and clarity before everything blurred. Some days it feels like he was cheated.)

(Nor had there been time then, more than that single second to burn the image into his retinas. There had been time with the Marlows. That was more satisfying.)

The woman in front of him looks as if someone took the phrase *‘stuck pig’* to its logical extreme. Other irreverent animal associations, this time with porcupines and hedgehogs, follow soon after, and *wow ok, brain,* now is not the time to play the Green Hills Zone theme from Sonic on a loop because he really needs to be focused and not start laughing inappropriately here, thanks.

He suspects his brain is shoving absurd humor down his throat in order to protect him from what he’s actually feeling in the deep, dark parts that are wholly cognizant of the fact that there is a dead body right in front of him and he is nowhere near as prepared for the reality of

it as he thought. He's not sure if it's a healthy response or not. That might depend on *what* those feelings he's trying not to acknowledge in front of Chilton and Crawford are.

His feet have carried him forward before he realizes it, pulling him closer to examine the vivid red burst of her ravaged eye sockets. "This was done while she was alive," he points, finger hovering not quite near enough to touch, though part of him wants to let the digit take a dip inside like a child eagerly scooping from a jar of finger paint. He pulls away and closes his eyes.

I catch her by surprise, delighting in the astonished fear in her eyes, so grand, I want to know what it feels like and I dig in, in, in, now she'll never look at anything ever again, all that fear spilling back into herself, oh this is such fun, fun, fun!

I watch as she crawls away, blind as a slug, I could watch her like this for hours but there's no time and so much left to do. The stand pierces into her back, digging in, grinding against all the lovely organs and viscera inside like my thumbs dug into her eyes, but I know where everything is and how to find the path of least resistance. Blood burbles up around the pole and from her mouth as she dies and then…hmm….

His eyes open and he looks at the finished product once more, frowning. The various tools and instruments stabbed into her like needles in a pincushion, which at first glance had been the most astounding thing to see, now seem so comparatively rote, each one placed meticulously with the same anxious desire to get it *right* as someone labeling parts of a diagram for an important written exam. The initial joy is gone. It feels forced.

"This isn't his design. It's a copy."

He looks back to the other men in the room with him. Jack has a curious, flat look to his face as he considers Will's statement, carefully blank as a stone, as bedrock.

Chilton gawps and for a second seems almost afraid, but that vanishes quickly as if he's remembering something, the look becoming one of wonder for Will and misplaced smugness again instead. "Oh! Jack, did you tell him before you got here?" The alpha shakes his head and Chilton's grin widens. "Simply marvelous," he says, gaze turned to Will again. "Will, you are absolutely correct. The Ripper's *design* here, as you put it, is based upon an illustration that circulated in old medical texts from ancient medieval times. I might have a textbook floating around in the office somewhere myself with a copy of that illustration. Would you like to see it?" he asks in a manner that is somehow both as lofty as a king offering to grant a magnanimous favor and giddily eager to please as a schoolboy with a crush.

"Sure," Will says, already turning away from him again. At least it means Chilton scampers off in a hurry and leaves him and Jack some time to themselves at the scene.

"Anything else grab your attention, Will?" Crawford asks, stepping around the other side of the corpse opposite to where Will is standing to look at it closer from that angle.

"I'm not trained for this, but most of the other wounds, they were almost all done after she died, right?" he asks. Far less blood seems to have come from all except for the eyes and the

central killing blow, and far more sedately than the vibrant gush and pop of her eyeballs.

“Yes. Forensics will confirm it later, but I can tell you now that nearly everything occurred post-mortem.”

“Is it normal for the Ripper?” Will asks.

Jack looks at him over the corpse consideringly for a moment before giving a short, firm negative shake of the head. They lock eyes for a whopping third time that day and hold it for a second longer as both of them consider what that might mean.

Chilton returns with the book and comes up beside Will, holding it open on the page he wants him to see. He throws a wary glance at the body that demonstrates an understandably normal human discomfort with being so near to one, yet still holds his ground and hovers close at the omega’s side to point rather unnecessarily to the scanned drawing in the center of the page. “You see? Exactly the same wound patterns, right down to a T,” he says in what he clearly believes to be a helpful tone.

Will takes the book from him and a considerable sidestep away so the man can no longer crowd into his personal space. He looks back and forth from the book to the body, circling it slowly as he goes, and confirms this assertion for every last one. “What kind of people would know about this diagram?” he asks.

“Oh, anyone with a decent background in the history of modern medicine,” says Chilton with a wave of his hand. He seems not to have taken offense to Will’s quick skirting away from him, indeed may not even have recognized it as intentional. “Doctors and surgeons especially. Which, incidentally, is a component of the Ripper’s profile, *and…”* he pauses for dramatic effect before finishing with self-satisfied relish, “Just so happens to have been Abel Gideon’s chosen profession before he came into my care almost two years ago.”

Will glances to Jack, who nods in confirmation, apparently no longer interested in withholding details of the Ripper case from him now that he’s already given his first impression notes.

Is Chilton right after all? Is this why the nurse’s mutilation looks like such a joyless imitation in comparison? But if that’s the case, why choose this drawing in the first place? What is the significance of it that the murderer would replicate it so dutifully? Will tries to understand but comes up empty, as empty and devoid of meaning as the reproduction before him, a stark departure from the earlier pleasure of the murder itself.

“The reason you couldn’t catch the Ripper two years ago, Jack, was that I already had him,” Chilton announces, as proud as if he had been the one to make the arrest himself.

“No,” Will declares suddenly. “This is a forgery,” he says, lips twisting unconsciously into a moue of distaste.

Chilton squawks, indignant. Jack, on the other hand, scrutinizes the young man and asks, “Are you sure, Will?”

Will thins his mouth, sucking his lips inward but not quite biting down on them. “I can’t be a hundred percent until I get a crash course on previous Ripper kills,” he admits.

Jack nods agreeably. “I’ll get you that file as soon as I can.”

“Please do,” Dr. Chilton interjects haughtily, not one to be left out of the discussion even for a moment. “The sooner Will is properly *educated* on all matters regarding the Chesapeake Ripper, the sooner this ridiculous notion can be put to rest. Jack, you know for the fact the details of Olmstead’s murder were never made public. I’m frankly shocked you would take this young man’s word at face value so readily when you haven’t even given him the appropriate tools he needs to make an informed judgment yet.” So apparently Will’s “talent” is only *marvelous* and *fascinating* when it isn’t being used in a way that indirectly bruises the beta’s fragile ego. That could come in handy the next time the psychiatrist acts uncomfortably keen on him again.

Jack looks like he’s counting to ten in his head, reining in the urge to lob something back in retaliation. As amusing as that would be to watch, if only because Chilton gives him the impression of a man who could be knocked over by a gentle breeze and Jack’s temper, he suspects, carries the howling force of a hurricane gale, Will decides to help him out with a change of topic. “Can I talk to this, um, Gideon person? Was that his name?”

Both men look to him in surprise, and both also seem oddly torn at this request. Chilton, a curious combination of queasy and *fascinated* once more, ugh, and Jack somewhere between guardedly hopeful and reluctant. “I…am not sure that would be a good idea, Will,” he says, and Will understands this to mean he *wants* to allow it to see what other insights the young man might glean but is afraid it might be one push too far and put his teacup too close to the edge. Will tries not to bristle at that. They both know he’s not really supposed to be here after all.

“Well, he’s certainly not going anywhere if you change your mind,” Chilton points out superciliously. “In the meantime, I’m sure you’d like to interview him yourself now, wouldn’t you, Agent Crawford?” At Jack’s nod, Chilton invites them back to his office where he can buzz one of his staff to make the arrangements.

Will has the sudden, awful premonition as they follow him back toward the front of the building that this means he’s about to be left *alone* with Dr. Frederick Chilton and frantically tries to think up a means of escape.

“Uhm, Jack…” he says as they get to the office and Chilton fumbles with his keys, putting into those two small words all the nervous tension of a kid who just saw something shocking and is only just now beginning to process it. He hopes this works.

“What is it, Will?” he asks. Even Chilton stops fumbling with the door to turn and look at him with what, surprisingly, might be actual concern.

“I-I just…” *Easy does it now. Don’t oversell it, Graham.* “That body, I think it’s, uh, I think it’s getting to me. I’d really like to go home now,” he says, voice breaking just the tiniest bit at *home.* Will refuses to look up from his shoes, needing his distress to be apparent but not so

dramatic that he seems ready to spiral into a panic attack, which would most likely hinder his goal and make them insist on him staying put until he's suitably calm again.

Even without looking, he can feel the tension in Crawford, his sense of duty and urgency to meet with the man who might be the Chesapeake Ripper warring with the need to fulfill the promise he made that they could go anytime Will asked.

"Agent Crawford has his responsibilities to the deceased, Will," Chilton says oversolicitously, "But I would be happy to host you here in my office until he's through. I was going to offer anyway." No, no, *no,* that is exactly what Will is trying to avoid. He shakes his head rapidly in genuine agitation and hopes they interpret it still as anxiety about the murder.

Jack is still being annoyingly silent, obviously undecided. To his right, Will hears a shuffle of feet rounding a corner and the white of an orderly uniform in his peripheral as one starts to walk past them in the hallway.

"Ah! You there!" Chilton says before the poor soul can move on. "This FBI agent needs to question Abel Gideon. See that he's prepped and presentable for an interview," he orders, taking it upon himself to make Jack's decision for him so he can get his one-on-one time with Will, the bastard.

"Oh," the man says and noticeably cringes, posture hunched in on itself and feet shuffling self-consciously in place. "Geez, I'm really sorry, Doctor Chilton, but I actually just clocked out." His voice is earnest, apologetic, and has just the faintest trace of a lisp. It is also, despite never carrying the slightest hint of *any* of these traits when Will has heard it before, dreadfully familiar.

Will drags his gaze upward. It's Matthew Brown.

Chilton sighs long-sufferingly like a drama queen. "Never mind then," he huffs, turning back toward his door dismissively. "I'll buzz Kimberly to get someone to do it in a moment."

"Um, if it's okay…" Matthew says in an uncertain voice, still standing there and fidgeting in place. Will very nearly forgets himself and gawks, the beta's awkward, subservient act so convincing even he would believe it if he'd never met the man before and didn't know it to be utter bullshit. "I heard you guys talking and I don't mind taking the other visitor home if, if that's what he wants," he says, sounding achingly sincere and like he just wants to be helpful since he can't fill his boss's request.

"What's your name, son?" Jack asks him. Oh, hell no. No *fucking* way.

"Matthew Brown, sir," says Matthew, and does an honest-to-god fucking *head bob* in Jack's direction like some geeky, pathetic parody of a bow, as if he doesn't know how to address the alpha except as one would a foreign king visiting at court.

"Matthew is one of my orderlies, Jack," says Chilton, stating the obvious. Will is ninety percent sure he didn't even know Matthew's name himself until just now, and is merely putting on a front of familiarity so he doesn't look bad. "I'd vouch for him as I would for any

of my employees. Will would be in safe hands," he says, obviously from his posture and the grind of his teeth reluctant to allow Will this "out" but feeling it would be improper to do otherwise. *"If* he's still heart-set on leaving, that is."

"Will?" Jack says, turning back to him. "What'll it be?" It's clear from his own posture and tone which answer he wants. He considers this to be a win-win for both of them.

Stuck between cozying it up with Chilton in his office for what could potentially be an hour if not longer, or with Matthew in his car for a ten minute drive, at the end of which he can run straight to Abigail and tell her all about this shitshow of a morning he's had, or straight into the shower to scrub the stink of this place from his skin, whichever is most appealing once he gets there. It isn't a choice at all really.

He mumbles through an acceptance of the offer and steps around Crawford and Chilton to follow Matthew without a goodbye for either of them. Jack stops him with a surprisingly gentle, *"Will."*

Will turns in side-profile to Jack, barely looking at him. "You did really well today," the man tells him. It's apparent that he's not really used to doling out praise, but he's trying for Will's sake, and he means it. Will wishes he could appreciate it more, for the rareness of it and the tentative stirrings of friendship that started to form today, but he now understands that Jack is a man who delegates promises when they become inconvenient, and he can't just forget that. "I'm proud of you."

Will gives no response, not even a nod, eyes flickering blankly to the wall. He turns away again and keeps walking.

Matthew doesn't try to speak to him directly for as long as they are still inside the hospital, for which Will is grateful. He steps outside first and shuffles aside to hold the door open like Will is a damn movie star. Will rolls his eyes before stepping through it.

The digital shutter and beep of a camera goes off, and Will stares down into the face of yet another one of his least favorite people standing at the bottom of the stone steps. Because of course his luck is just that bad today. The universe hates him.

"Fancy running into you here, Will Graham," says Freddie Lounds, a casual smirk on her face, no surprise in her voice at all.

"I'll be at the car, Mr. Graham," says Matthew, still in hospital persona. He shuffles away, Will noting that where he had been standing just happens to be out of frame of Freddie's shot. The slippery asshole saw her there and narrowly dodged an unwanted photograph without warning Will so he could do the same. What a dick.

"Cute chauffeur," Freddie says while barely glancing where Matthew had gone, dismissing him as no one just as blithely as Chilton and Crawford had done. "Jack must be pretty busy in there if you're having to catch a ride with someone else."

"What are you doing out here, Freddie?" Will asks, stepping forward so he's away from the door but still on the stairs above her because he wants to be petty. He scans over her head as

if he expects more reporters to crawl out from the bushes or behind the treeline.

“They won’t let me in to interview Gideon or take pictures,” she says, shrugging in a rueful *‘What can you do?’* sort of gesture.

“How do you even know about that already?” he asks, having no reason to pretend he has no idea what’s going on.

“Chilton called me. *I know,”* she says wryly when Will’s eyebrow goes up. “Kind of a dick move to do that and then not even let me in to see. Pretty sure he just wanted me to get a photo of you coming out,” she adds, lightly tapping a finger on the camera still in her hands. *Ugh,* of course he would.

“Don’t give him what he wants, Freddie. He’ll just jerk you around like that again if you do.”

“Oh, don’t worry about little old me,” she says. “My readers are going to eat it up when I tell them all about the incompetence of the mental hospital director who let one of his own nurses get butchered right under his nose.” Will smirks, not liking that it feels like he’s sharing in a joke with Freddie, but he can’t help it. It’s the least that guy deserves.

“You know, I might be inclined not to publish this pic anyway,” she carries on, “if a certain someone would just agree to do an interview like I asked months ago.”

“You still want that article about the Red Dragon? Or would this one just be all about Magical Empath Will Graham?” he sneers, not hiding his dislike of her as well as he did all those months ago and no longer caring. She’s smart enough to have picked up on it already anyway.

“Actually, I’m thinking a book now.” Will laughs out loud at her sheer gall. Freddie smiles back, though not in shared humor. “Not just about the Dragon,” she continues. “But the Shrike as well. And their survivors.” Will is definitely not laughing now.

“Now *that’s* a face that tells me exactly what I need to know,” Freddie says. That makes one of them. Will has no idea what face he’s making right now. “Heard a little rumor that you two have been thick as thieves from the moment you met, had to be sure my source wasn’t bullshitting me. Throws a bit of heartwarming in with the harrowing. It’s almost sweet. Readers will certainly think so. Or they’ll wonder what’s really going on there, what makes two people who spent their lives with monsters gravitate towards each other after their old monsters are gone.” She shrugs again, far too casually. “It all depends on the spin.”

“You are not writing about her,” Will snarls. “You are not writing about *us.”*

“I am. The question is, do you want it to be a book you and she get some creative control over, or a couple of articles where you don’t?”

Wordlessly, Will takes a step down, and another step, and another until Freddie has to back up to give him room. When he’s on ground level with her, he gets right into her space and asks, voice deathly quiet, “You know what makes us survivors so unpredictable?” He leans

even closer, almost in cruel parody of someone going in for a kiss, until she pulls back again, unsettled. “It’s that we know we can do it again.”

He leaves her to make of that whatever the hell she wants.

The one upside is, after that? He no longer feels so anxious about his decision to get in a car with Matthew.

“All set?” the man asks, back to his usual self now that it’s only Will around, leaning casually against his car in just a dark T-shirt, the orderly coat already tossed in the backseat.

“Just drive,” Will says, letting himself in on the passenger side without waiting for the other man to get in. Matthew grins.

“You’re hot when you’re angry,” he says, sliding into his own seat.

“Hell of a performance you gave in there earlier,” Will says, ignoring the comment.

“Aww, thanks, babe. I could say the same about yours.” Will does not rise to the bait, keeping his eyes forward on the road. “Any more compliments for me, or is that all I get? I gotta say I think I’m owed more than that after gallantly rescuing you from teatime with Chilty.”

“You certainly showed up right in the nick of time. One might say *conveniently,”* Will points out. Convenient for Matthew, at any rate. Not so convenient for Will, even if he is glad to be away from Chilton and his fumbling attempts to paw at Will’s brain. “Were you following us around the whole time?” he asks.

“Nah, Doc’s got cameras set up everywhere he’s not legally obligated to keep surveillance-free.” Will shudders at the reveal of that bit of information. As if that place and its director—and at least one of the employees—weren’t already creepy and violating enough.

After a few seconds of quiet, Matthew then asks, “What did you think of her?” Will is confused at first, not sure who he’s referring to, until it dawns on him that he means the dead nurse.

“I take it she wasn’t a friend of yours,” he says, noting the peculiarity of the question and lack of emotionality behind it.

Matthew shrugs. “I didn’t *dislike* her,” he says. “She was nice enough, I guess. Now she’s a pincushion.” He makes a banal sweeping gesture with his hand. “So it goes.”

“One bird said to Billy Pilgrim, *‘Poo-tee-weet?’”*

Matthew looks over at him, a brief flare of excitement in his eyes, more emotion there than when they were talking about the dead woman. “You read Vonnegut?”

“I read a lot of things.” He’s had plenty of free time over the last six years after all. Oodles of it. He decides to ask a question of his own. “Did someone put Gideon up to killing her?” At the wide, delighted smile this gets, Will rephrases, “Did you?”

“I wish I had now,” the other man answers, still grinning. “You’re on the right track. I don’t think it was putting him up to actually *killing* per se, but poor old Dr. Gideon, it’s almost as if he’s been of two minds about just who he is lately.”

Will understands in an instant. “He actually thinks he is the Chesapeake Ripper. Someone *made* him think he’s the Ripper.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny,” Matthew says, but he’s still smiling. “Mr. Boss Man mysteriously stopped recording the audio on all their sessions a little while back. Didn’t even tell an orderly to cut the mics, just unplugged them himself. Which was always a bitch to reset afterwards because he never did it right, by the way.”

“Goddamn Chilton,” Will mutters. “He’s actually a moron, isn’t he?”

Matthew giggles and nods in response. “It’s so great,” he says. “Hands down, best boss I’ve ever had.”

“Hm,” Will replies noncommittally. He imagines it’s not so great for the inmates, all considered. The ride grows silent again as Matthew’s laughter dies down. Will turns his focus back to the road.

His blood freezes. This is not the road to Port Haven. This is a highway leading out of town.

“Matthew, I will remind you there is an FBI agent and a dozen other people who saw us together on the way out and know I’m with you right now.” Silently, he curses himself and the man beside him for his earlier distraction. He should have realized much sooner they were going the wrong way.

“What exactly is it you think I’d do if that wasn’t the case?” Will doesn’t have an answer for that.

“Relax,” Matthew says. A hand comes down on Will’s arm. Will immediately jerks it away, lip curling upward into a silent snarl.

“Tell me where you are taking me,” he says once he regains some control over his face and voice.

“D.C. Telling you anything more right now would spoil the surprise.” Will takes a deep breath, whether in preparation to respond or just to calm himself, he isn’t sure, but Matthew appears to take it as the former because he adds, “I will give a hint. It has at least a bit to do with local history.”

That’s just appropriately vague enough to actually be somewhat intriguing. “You don’t strike me as a national monuments buff,” he ventures.

“You’re right,” Matthew agrees. He looks over at Will, who is still sitting tensely at his side, although the initial shock and fear are gone. “I’ll have you back at the castle before nightfall, princess, don’t you worry. I just want to spend more time with you. Think of this as our first real date.”

“I won’t,” Will promises him. Matthew, as per usual, is more amused by this than put-off.

“Well, if it’s that bad you can always call that Crawford guy and tell him I kidnapped you,” he says, and shifts a little in his seat so he can reach into his pants pocket and pull out a cell phone. “Here you go.”

Will stares at the phone in his hand without reaching for it, suspicious and wary while also wondering just what sort of game the man is playing.

He’s always had a habit of letting his curiosity get the better of him too.

“I will actually need to call someone,” he says after a moment. “Let them know where I am.” If he doesn’t, Abigail might worry and Alana will most certainly call a manhunt. Jack would call one of his own and probably end up shooting someone. He doesn’t know how Hannibal would react, but that’s not a curiosity he can indulge without risk of the first three.

He takes the phone, being careful to touch skin-to-skin as little as possible.

Matthew takes his hand back and keeps his gaze forward. He isn’t sporting one of his usual smiles, but he does whistle. Nothing recognizable as a tune Will knows, but something cheery and nonsensical. Like birdsong.

*

There is a knock at her door, not one she is familiar with. Abigail looks up curiously, lowering the open book in her hands into her lap. “Come in.”

The door opens and Doctor Lecter steps in to greet her. Her confused, curious look blanks into one of surprise.

“Are you looking for Will?” she asks after initial greetings have passed between them. “He’s not here right now. Agent Crawford signed him out this morning.”

“Did he?” Lecter asks with a faint lift of his brows. “It’s just as well. I am actually here to see you today, Abigail.”

“Huh.” That’s far from the most eloquent response she could have given, and probably not the politest one either. She closes her book and sets it aside on the windowsill, standing up to face him properly. At least if she can’t think of anything interesting to say back straight away, she can give him her full attention. He seems the sort who would appreciate such a gesture.

He does, if the microsmile he gives is anything to go by. It doesn’t hold the same warmth as the one he gave her at dinner the other night, but it seems sincere. Most of his smiles seem sincere.

Maybe they really are. Maybe Doctor Lecter is more honest than anyone realizes, if not necessarily open. She doesn’t think he’s a faker.

Will wouldn’t like him so much if he thought so either.

“What is it you want to talk to me about?” she asks. Perhaps that’s a silly question. Still worth asking though.

“You assume our conversation would have an agenda.”

“All conversations have agendas,” Abigail points out. She feels weirdly grown-up for saying that, but also childish for thinking so. Does this guy make everyone he talks to feel like their head is spinning just trying to keep up? Of course Will would be weird enough to be into that.

She keeps putting him in that context, she realizes, only thinking of him in terms of how he connects back to Will. She doesn’t know where he fits on his own terms just yet, or in relation to her.

“Then let our agenda for today being getting to know one another better,” he says, on the same wavelength as her. His smile turns playful as he asks with a touch of whimsical formality, “Miss Hobbs, would you care to join me this afternoon for lunch?”

Lunch. That ought to make her feel apprehensive, shouldn’t it? Considering what she knows.

Abigail returns the smile in kind. “Doctor Lecter, I would be delighted,” she answers, and picks up her jacket.

Chapter End Notes

Whew. You guys. Will was such a whirlwind in this one, wasn't he? *wipes sweat off brow* This would've had more scene breaks instead of the long continuous shot if not for the fact that we couldn't look away from Will for a second without missing something. I swear he thrives on exhausting me.

The Burial of the Sardine

Chapter Summary

“Dear Will, what will your date think of you spending this much time talking to another man on your excursion together?”

Will makes an even louder noise of disgust than the last one. “You’re the worst, you know that? I should’ve let you think that’s really what it was, then you wouldn’t be so… umm…” The younger man cuts himself off, realizing he’s come dangerously close to openly acknowledging what they both know but have been careful to maneuver around in conversation, alluding to it only vaguely up to this point.

“Wouldn’t be so what, Will?” he asks, relentless in the pursuit of either trapping the omega into saying something he’d rather not or at least squirming a little as he wriggles free of the snare. “Is there a particular reaction you were hoping to get from this call?”

Hannigram flirting, on a brownham sort-of-but-sort-of-not date? Scandalous!

Chapter Notes

For the first time in forever, a Goya work! Also, I've finally gone back and added the chapter titles to the Table of Contents directory and links in the notes to all of the art pieces referenced in each one.

Fair warning, I just googled and clicked on the best looking versions I could find, so a number of the links are from actual museums' sites and therefore like to track cookies for some reason (seriously, why are museums ALL like that??) Remember to turn that off or clear your histories if you don't want to deal with it, yadda yadda, y'all know how the internet works. :P

Alternatively, you could just continue googling them yourselves like always (y'all were TOTALLY doing that and not just ignoring my geeky little art blurbs in the notes, riiiiiight guys? xD)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XVII. The Burial of the Sardine

Will dials the first number he had memorized since he got out of the general hospital. It goes to Bloom's voicemail, her soothing beta voice assuring the listener she will return their call as soon as she is able and giving the number to a standard emergency helpline if it's for something that cannot wait before signing off at the beep. "Hey, uh, it's Will," he says. "You're probably in class now. Umm, I'm sure Marcie's left you a message too," he adds, namedropping the receptionist on duty this morning, "about me being with Jack. I'm done with that now, just, uh, just needed to clear my head and happened to bump into a…friend. So." He clears his throat. "He's gonna help me get my mind off, um, *you know,* but I'll be back soon so there's nothing to worry about, okay? Lo-*let me know,* if, uh, if you need me back sooner, you can just call this number back, yeah? Yeah. Okay. Um. Bye."

He ends the message quickly and turns away toward the window while he breathes out through his nose, hoping his face isn't red, though nowhere near as hopeful that Matthew didn't catch *something* odd about his reaction even if his eyes are still on the road ahead in some fake semblance of good manners. Will needs the quiet moment of reflection to himself —he can't *believe* he almost just said, *"Love you,"* with the same casual, familiar intimacy he once said the same at the end of calls with his father. Yikes. With luck, Alana won't catch that little flub when he spoke and read into it too deeply. He's so goddamned awkward on the phone in general that it hopefully won't stand out from the rest.

"So I'm your friend now. That's progress at least," Matthew quips, not so polite to pretend like he didn't listen in and reading into the younger man's words himself as they suit him best. Will considers flipping him the bird but decides he'd rather not hear how the beta might deliberately misconstrue that gesture as well. Matthew doesn't reach to take his phone back, which is just as well since Will has no intention of returning it to him until he's being dropped off at Port Haven later. He should think about investing some of that little bit of money he has squirreled away thanks to Bloom on getting a mobile plan for himself and Abigail.

He also has another call to make once they're in D.C., assuming the card is still in his wallet where he slid it out of sight months ago, not memorizing that number since he never thought he would have a need for it. He needs to be able to step away for a bit where Matthew can't overhear first—no particular reason why, other than finding it none of the other man's business who else is on Will's short list of "Contacts Who Should Probably Have Some Clue to My Whereabouts in Case I Turn Up Missing." It's gotten longer than it used to be since the last time he really did "disappear" according to the rest of the world, from zero names to at least three. Huh. How about that.

Abigail will forgive him for not calling Port Haven to have someone there tell her too. He doesn't know how long he'll have when he does get his chance and doesn't want to waste it listening to a lecture from one of the nurses on duty for not coming straight back as if it's actually his fault—which, he realizes, is exactly what it'll seem like when Alana listens to his voicemail later. Her, he'll accept getting a talking to from, already resigned to it for making her worry.

He slips the phone into his own pocket and then turns the car radio on without asking, flipping through stations until some Top 40s one comes through with good enough clarity to stop. Matthew thankfully takes the hint and doesn't try to strike up another conversation the

rest of the trip, only looking at Will once to laugh silently with his eyes before averting them politely back to the road once more.

His curiosity and confusion are further piqued when they get to the capital and he realizes based on the buildings passing them by that the street they're on is part of the city's museum district. He hadn't expected their destination would be somewhere so…touristy. He looks to the man driving for a hint, but Matthew's expression gives nothing away, beyond the usual pleased demeanor from just having Will's attention in the first place.

It isn't until they've parked next to a meter and walked for over a block, after which Matthew begins to slow his pace and head with purpose to one building in particular, a relatively newer and smaller one compared to the surrounding ones, that Will realizes this definitely isn't going to be the "distraction" from the scene he saw earlier today that he implied to Alana it would be.

"EVIL MINDS MUSEUM OF CRIMINAL PSYCHOPATHY" is emblazoned in sharp, stylized red letters over the entryway. There are banners in the window displays which show nothing more than horror movie style silhouettes of easily recognized figures who have played particularly infamous roles in modern American history—the shaggy long hair of Charles Manson's mugshot, the iconic clown hat from John Wayne Gacy's wardrobe, to name just a couple, enough to let Will know *exactly* what kind of people this place is memorializing.

"They built it just a little over a year ago," Matthew tells him, watching Will carefully for his reaction. Will does his best not to give him one, his own gaze still on the façade in front of them. "Amidst tons of bad press and lots of protesting, *and yet,"* he gestures to the crowd of tourists walking in ahead of them, some of them craning their heads to gawk up at the sinister looking sign and take pictures of it before heading inside as well, "it's been one of the most popular museums in the whole damn country since it opened up to the public. Really tells you something about people, doesn't it?"

"The name's a little…hammy, isn't it?" Will says. Matthew laughs like he's just told a joke.

Inside the lobby there's a plaque describing the museum's brief history and academic goals. Ticket proceeds go to funding for the Criminal Justice and Psychology departments at Georgetown University, who worked jointly on creating it in the first place. The exhibits within were apparently inspired by the similarly named "Evil Minds Research Museum," based at Quantico and operated by the FBI, which only scholars and professionals within relevant fields can visit by appointment, as opposed to this one where laymen can come in anytime they like during normal visiting hours. The plaque goes on to emphasize the fact that all memorabilia sold at the gift shop and paraphernalia put on display are mere replicas and recreations, not the actual real letters, weapons, or other former possessions of convicted killers.

None of that alleviates the bad taste in Will's mouth, especially when not ten yards away is a line of people queuing up to take selfies with wax figures of some of the killers silhouetted outside, many of them in jokingly scared or mock-dead poses. It's all very tacky. Tasteless. But what bugs him about it the most isn't the irreverence or the giggly excitement of groups here to indulge a little morbid curiosity, at least not in itself. It's more about the fact that

that's all it is for most of them—a curiosity, a sideshow, a glimpse of the "uglier," darker side of humanity very few of them will ever come close to being able to genuinely comprehend. They don't seem to fully understand beyond the surface level that these aren't movie monsters like Frankenstein or Dracula, not the way that Will understands—with heady, dreadful intimacy.

Will Graham is a murderer himself, after all, in all but the act itself. A murderer's accomplice and confidant, which is only a hairsbreadth away from murderer in deed really, though not many people would understand that either, he imagines. Only Abigail understands it as well as he does, because they are just alike in that regard. He's sure she wouldn't enjoy this either.

I'm here, I'm standing right here, among you all, not a figure made of wax and metal rods on a dais. I'm a real, living, breathing human, just like all of you. Molecules of air are at this very moment being filtered out of my lungs and into yours.

If these are Will's thoughts as they wait in line to get their own tickets, what are Matthew's? He doesn't want to ask. What is he hoping to accomplish or trying to prove by bringing him here?

Will may not want to know the answer to that either. He hasn't decided yet.

At the first opportunity, he breaks away from Matthew and heads into an omegan-only bathroom near the front entrance with barely a word of explanation, leaving the beta to wait patiently out in the hall for him. Let him think Will needs the time to himself after the long car ride, or because of where they are, either way is fine. Neither are wholly inaccurate reasons anyway, they're just not the main one.

He shuts himself into the furthest stall from the doorway, pulls out his borrowed phone, and dials the number written on the back of Hannibal Lecter's business card.

*

Lecter is customarily in the habit of letting his personal cell go to voicemail first if he is at work, especially when the number calling is an unknown one, but as he only had morning sessions today and has just seen the last of his patients out, he picks up after the first vibration goes off in his pocket. It is fortunate that he does.

"Oh," the voice on the other end greets back ineloquently. *"You picked up. I was just going to…well, whatever, it doesn't matter. Okay, to be honest it's kind of awkward actually, I'm not good at this, but…yeah. Uh. This is Will, by the way. Hi,"* says his caller as if Hannibal would not recognize that voice anywhere.

"Hello Will," Hannibal returns warmly, settling back into his preferred armchair. "You're right, you don't sound half as eloquent over the phone as you do during our regular conversations."

Surprised laughter can be heard through the speaker. There's a slight echo to it as if he were speaking in close quarters. *"Asshole! You're not supposed to agree with me."* Will sounds much more relaxed already, exactly the effect he intended.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of hearing your voice today, awkward or otherwise? I don’t recognize this number you’re calling from.”

“Right, about that…” Will proceeds to tell Hannibal what he suspects is a much-shortened account of the events of his own morning. The facts are related to him simply and dryly, without an ounce of embellishment or distress in the other’s voice, yet the more Hannibal listens, the more a curious thrum of energy plays along his own nerves. There is quite a lot to unpack from it, especially concerning the particulars of whatever this “scene” Jack Crawford wanted him to examine at the BSHCI entails, but all of that is something that can wait and not among the most pertinent questions at this precise moment in time.

“You know this young man who drove you to D.C.?” Will had not directly stated as much, but it was apparent in the way he spoke of him just now.

There is a pause, during which that energy thrums higher. *“He’s the guy from the heat clinic,”* Will tells him finally. *“I also met him once before. At the bar that other night. I didn’t tell you that part.”*

“The man you found intriguing.” There is no jealousy in Lecter’s tone. There is a reason Will is choosing to relay this information to him now, and judging by the distinct lack of teasing in his own tone, it is not a continuation of the same game which led to him bringing the beta up in conversation at the mall that first time.

Will makes a noise of disgust. *“Intrigued is not the same as* interested, *at least not in the way this guy wants to think.”*

“Do you feel this Matthew Brown is dangerous, Will?”

“He’s not going to hurt me.” It is not, precisely, an answer to Hannibal’s question. Intriguing indeed.

He decides to let this line of inquiry go for the moment. He trusts Will’s assessment of his own situation and will not beleaguer the point if the younger man believes there is no reason to be concerned for his safety at this juncture. The tension he felt earlier has passed.

This doesn’t mean he can’t get a bit of reckoning for last time with a little teasing of his own. “Dear Will, what will your date think of you spending this much time talking to another man on your excursion together?”

Will makes an even louder noise of disgust than the last one. *“You’re the worst, you know that? I should’ve let you think that’s really what it was, then you wouldn’t be so…umm…”* The younger man cuts himself off, realizing he’s come dangerously close to openly acknowledging what they both know but have been careful to maneuver around in conversation, alluding to it only vaguely up to this point.

“Wouldn’t be so what, Will?” he asks, relentless in the pursuit of either trapping the omega into saying something he’d rather not or at least squirming a little as he wriggles free of the snare. “Is there a particular reaction you were hoping to get from this call?”

"You prick. God, leave the fishing to me from now on, alright? You suck at it," Will says, a clear smile in his voice. *"No subtlety at all."*

"Apologies, my good Will. I thought too much subtlety would be tantamount to a lie, and you have already asked me not to lie to you."

He hears a muttered aside which he may or may not be meant to overhear, something about himself and his *"ridiculous epithets."* Hannibal smiles and does not remark upon it either way. *"Yeah well, sins of omission are still fair game,"* Will says clearly, speaking to him more directly once more.

"So they are." And oh, how many there are still littered on the board between them. He wonders what will happen as more and more of them are slowly revealed. Speaking of, there is at least one which Hannibal may be able to spin into his own advantage yet, and it occurs to him that now would be an excellent time to pursue that avenue whilst Will is out of town.

"By the way, don't mention this to Abigail." Hannibal blinks. Their thoughts seem to run so nearly parallel at times that it's almost uncanny. *"It's not a secret, and I know you probably won't see her or talk to her before I do anyway,"* Will adds, proving at least that he is not a psychic or a mind reader. *"But I wanted to throw it out there just in case. I'll tell her about it myself when I get back. If she knows before then, she'll just overthink the whole time I'm gone and worry."*

"I take it Abigail is not a fan of Mr. Brown either then?" Hannibal asks.

"Understatement," Will informs him dryly. Hannibal would love to hear more about this beta and their first run-in with him in Abigail's own words, but he will not be able to ask her without violating Will's request, so he tables that for another time.

The omega ends their call not long after, complaining lightheartedly that he can't hide out in the bathroom from his undesirable would-be suitor indefinitely. Hannibal tries not to preen at the implication that his own company is far more desired and welcomed even over long distance, sure that he is meant to read as much into the statement, more honey being poured into his own trap, true or not.

It is a simple matter then of collecting Abigail from Port Haven immediately afterwards. Her ready acceptance makes him optimistic. He is glad he did not resort to killing her after all. She is a fascinating and charming individual within her own right, that much is becoming clear, worth keeping around for more than just her usefulness to his goal of growing closer to Will.

That being said, he will not hesitate to remove her should things turn sour and it proves more prudent to do so.

The assessing looks which she openly gives him across the island countertop in his kitchen not half an hour later indicate her thinking is much along the same lines. Atta girl.

"So," she says as she sets to the task of chopping vegetables Hannibal has laid out in front of her, designating her his sous chef for their early afternoon brunch. "We gonna beat around the

bush about this, or can I just be upfront?"

"We will pursue our chat in whichever manner you find most befitting," he assures her. She nods her appreciation.

"You eat people," she says, as directly as she promised.

"You eat people," he rejoins pleasantly. "Or, you did every time your father brought more to the table from his lonely hunts." The girl frowns. He is curious which part of that statement it is that makes her unhappy. It would be interesting, not to mention fortuitous, if it is the part which he thinks it is. "You did not say anything to Will after our dinner the other evening." It is not a question, simply a statement of fact.

"He's a big boy. He can handle figuring it out on his own." That is not the entirety of her reasoning, her nonchalance a partly feigned thing, hiding uncertainty tinged with understandable traces of fear and what might be, possibly, a sliver of hope. There marks another tick in the box of Hannibal's suspicions about her.

"Does Will know about your prior experiences with cannibalism?" he asks, knowing she will appreciate the returned directness. She looks at him assessingly again while giving nothing away herself, likely weighing the pros and cons of which answer would be best to give and whether or not to lie about it. He's proud of her. She is a natural in the art of manipulation and will learn to be a pro at it yet.

"He does," she answers finally. He does not have Will's talent for detecting outright prevarication, but he believes she is telling the truth. How interesting this makes things.

"Does he know that you enjoyed them?" he follows up when she is refocused on cutting the carrots to the correct length. Her hands twitch into the quickest of pauses before starting up again. It is answer enough.

There is silence in the kitchen save for the sounds of their prepwork for a couple of minutes, not wholly uncomfortable. Only when she is finished with her chopping does she say, "I'd ask if that's pretty messed up of me, but considering who I'm talking to I don't think the answer I'd get would be totally unbiased." She watches with dark, rapt eyes as he starts slicing into the "beef" for their meal.

"An abnormal response in the face of an abnormal situation is itself entirely normal," he assures her. "And in your case, entirely warranted as well. Each of those girls was meant to represent you. With every bite, you were absorbing a piece of them, of their life, and taking it into your own. Their deaths quite literally sparked the fuel which sustained your own survival for another day." Having finished cubing the meat, he sets the knife down and looks up into her eyes. "No headier feeling than finding yourself suddenly at the top of the food chain amidst a sea of supposed peers."

There is a sheen of wetness to her eyes, but not quite enough to gather and fall as tears. "Shouldn't I be feeling guilty though? Those girls died because of me."

"Never feel guilty for living, Abigail. I certainly don't."

“No, I guess you wouldn’t,” she says with a tiny smile. “Why do you do it?” she asks. “I can’t imagine it’s for the same reasons.”

“Whenever feasible, one should always endeavor to eat the rude,” he divulges his personal philosophy to her. She seems almost shocked at first, then greatly intrigued.

“That’s kind of…” She barks out a laugh. “Okay, you’re kind of living the dream then, from the sounds of it.”

“Who hasn’t considered gutting the rude pig who cuts him off in the middle of traffic, or spills a drink down her dress without apologizing for it?” he agrees.

The familiar and subtle, warm scent of dog announces Winston’s arrival in the kitchen to him even before the click of her nails against the tiled floor, likely drawn in by the sound of Abigail’s laughter. “Heya, girl, how’s it going?” Abigail asks, already immediately more cheerful than before. This is the second time they have met, the dog being much doted upon by all three of his guests both before and after their dinner on the night of the concert, though understandably she had been most excited to see her previous playmate and companion Will again. “I was wondering where you were.”

“She is not forbidden from entering the kitchen, but she knows not to get underfoot and generally stays out of the way during cooking. She is a very smart animal.”

“She sure is,” Abigail gushes, though she resists petting in case she is called upon to help more with the meal prep. “Can I…?” She takes a cube of meat between her fingers without picking it up from the cutting board, looking to him questioningly first.

“Just the one,” he allows with an indulgent smile. “I will be giving her some bones to gnaw on during our meal and make her food as well later on.”

Abigail takes the cube and holds it aloft. “Winston, sit.” The dog does not listen right away, still standing and licking her chops eagerly now for the treat dangled in front of her. *“Sit,”* Abigail repeats more firmly. Winston does. “Good girl,” she praises and tosses the scrap lightly in her direction, the dog catching it between her jaws easily. “Will’s gonna be so jealous I got to see you today!”

“I have been taking Winston on longer walks to more crowded parks of late,” Hannibal informs her conversationally. “Allowing her to meet more people to assess how comfortably she handles different types of strangers. She has a good nose for who to be friendly to and who to avoid, should they seem skittish or put off by her presence. I’m thinking I may start bringing her to the office with me on days I have appointments with patients who would be comforted rather than alarmed by the presence of an animal.”

“Uh-huh. And those days would just happen to coincide with the ones when Will shows up, am I right?” she asks a bit cheekily over her shoulder. “Or as he would say, ‘You ain’t slick, Doc,’” she says, imitating the faint drawl Will deliberately allows to creep back into his own voice for effect on occasion, when the mood suits him, usually when he chooses to return to the “rougher” regional vocabulary of his roots. Hannibal smirks and doesn’t say anything.

Abigail turns around fully then to see him combining the rest of the meat with the vegetables she cut. He gestures to her that she can now start helping him scoop the mixture onto the small pie crusts he has made if she wishes, and her eyes alight with recognition as she takes in the sight of all the ingredients together. “You’re making pasties!”

“We are,” he says lightly. She steps in beside him to help add in the filling. “I thought for our first personal meal together you would appreciate a little taste of home.” In more ways than one obviously, considering the meat’s source, but that goes without saying at this point.

“You’re just trying to butter me up,” she says, blinks, and then giggles as she realizes her own accidental pun. “Does this mean Will should expect some spicy seafood and rice in his future too?” she asks, teasing again.

“It might,” he indulges with a bit of mock-annoyance as if he has been caught.

“Don’t suppose my meals are going to start including tater tot hotdishes or salads with mayo too though, are they?” The moue of distaste his face makes is only slightly exaggerated. Abigail snickers.

“Seriously though,” she adds a bit later once the pasties have been slid into the oven, their hands washed and workspace cleaned and reorganized. “Don’t think I don’t see what it is you’re doing here, trying to get on my good side and all.” He merely looks at her with a questioning gaze. *“If you wanna be my lover, you gotta get with my friends,”* she singsongs in a silly fashion, causing Winston’s ears to perk up dubiously. “Sorry,” she snorts. “My mom was secretly a Spice Girls fanatic. But the point stands so we might as well get to Part Two of this conversation we’ve been needing to have.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “What exactly are your intentions with our mutual acquaintance, one Mr. Will Graham? Take care and choose your words wisely,” she says with playful formality, trying to lighten the mood, but the sharp glint which has taken up residence in her own gaze indicates the implied warning behind it is quite serious.

“I think you already know,” he tells her, now carefully stirring the gravy slowly simmering on the stovetop. “Judging by the pop song lyric you chose to quote.”

“I want to hear you say it.” The playful act has vanished.

He waits until the gravy is ready before looking up again, turning off the stove and removing it from the heat before answering. “I am courting with the intent to mate and bond with him, if he will have me.” She watches his face carefully for tells before nodding, his confession matching up with what she has already surmised.

“And if he won’t?” she asks.

“I will be terribly disappointed,” he admits. What form that disappointment might take, even he cannot predict at this moment, but one thing he does know with certainty—he will not force the issue of a mating or a bond, as Francis Dolarhyde had. He is neither so callous as to completely dismiss Will’s choice in the matter nor so foolish as to believe such a course of action would end in any way but badly for him. “I hope it won’t come to that.”

“Me too,” she says, somewhat surprisingly. “I like you, Doctor Lecter. I think…I think you could be really good for him. You’d certainly better be,” she adds viciously. “This isn’t a shovel talk. I’m not naïve enough to think you’re the one who’d end up in the ground, or in the stew as it were, if it came down to a real fight between you and me,” she says. “But know that if you ever hurt him I will see to it that you bleed for it.”

“I believe you.” He does, and admires her all the more for it. There is little Abigail Hobbs won’t do in the name of defending her family. He would be honored to count himself as a part of it one day.

The easier, comfortable rapport returns to them later at the dining table, with the onset of good food and good conversation to go with it.

“Oh my god, this is *so good!”* she says, trying to discreetly lick some of the gravy from her fingers before using the napkin, which Hannibal politely pretends not to notice. Some lapses in good manners can actually be considered high compliments at the table. “You have to let me take one of these back to Will! We never get to eat this good at the hospital.”

Hannibal looks to her consideringly. She seems not to have given thought to the enormity of what she just asked. It is one thing to entrust her with the knowledge of who his butcher is and another to allow her to leave with potentially damning evidence of it.

And on the other hand, the ability to provide for Will in even this indirect way is always tempting. More so, really, in knowing that Abigail Hobbs is giving her endorsement and abetting his cause by being the one to give it to him. It is another test in the trust and blooming friendship that has grown between himself and Abigail today.

“I’ll make up a container of leftovers for you both before we leave,” he promises.

*

Will really thinks this place could do without all the mood lighting set up throughout the corridors and walkways in stark contrast to the brightly lit displays—“bloodstained” letters and life-size models of old cars with “bullet holes” drilled into the doors and such—but he can admit the purveyors of this little attraction probably understand their target audience better than he does, college kids about his age and bored middle-aged couples looking for cheap thrills equivalent to entering a haunted house setup or going on a ghost tour. At least it means he isn’t looking too closely at any of the other museum-goers' faces and seeing their expressions, so that’s a plus.

Matthew has an on-again, off-again running commentary for him of “fun facts” which don’t get mentioned in any of the brief descriptions that go along with the displays. Will humors him with responses only every now and again, mostly tuning him out when he can. Collecting serial killer trivia is by no means as unusual of a hobby as people like to pretend it is, as the popularity of this place can attest, but there’s a definite blend of amusement and reverence to some of what Brown is saying that Will finds more offensive than the museum itself and the more innocent curiosity of its other visitors.

One staged space is cordoned off with fake police tape and a giant banner marked “Coming Soon!” He drifts closer to the sign in front of it demoing a picture preview of what the open space “room” will be once it’s complete, and is immediately thankful once again that Abigail isn’t here to see this.

“The Minnesota Shrike’s Den of Horrors!” is what the sign jauntily labels the tabloid snapshot of a cabin room filled from top to bottom on every wall with a variety of darkly stained antlers, credited in fine print on the bottom right of the image to one Freddie Lounds, *of course.*

If this elaborate setup is being staged as a permanent installment in the museum so soon after the investigation into Garret Jacob Hobbs has officially wrapped up then…

Will rounds the next corner with a sick feeling in his gut, one that pinches and roils as he finds exactly what he expected to see there.

He closes his eyes against the larger-than-life, door length poster of the Great Red Dragon from Blake’s painting—much larger, in reality, than the actual painting itself and blown up to reveal it in all its *exquisite* detail—so much like the one that was once meticulously taped on the back to the door of Frank’s workout room that he has to squint and look carefully for any fading or crinkles from age to make sure the plaque up front was not lying about carrying no originals. It is perfectly flat and vividly colored, most likely bought or donated from the Brooklyn Museum directly and too new to be the same one he remembers.

Backlit against the wall next to it is an image on an old-school projector loop of Will’s former home and personal hell for the past half-decade, the wrought-iron gate wedged into the high stone fence and “Dolarhyde Nursing Home” sign looking more sinister than reality through the deliberate distorted pops and flickers on the screen.

And chained at the spine to a dais in front of the rest of the display is a laminated copy of the manifesto Will was never, ever allowed to touch or even *look* at, freely open and available for anyone to peruse at their leisure. There’s a gaggle of three standing around it doing just that in fact, pointing and gasping at the pages, making faint noises of disgust and giggling nervously at some.

Will has an impulse itching under his skin to grab one of them by the hair and smash their head against the wall with enough brute force to leave behind broken teeth and a sick red smear.

He waits and does not go anywhere near the book until the group moves on out of reach. It’s been left open somewhere in the middle so he has to flip back to the beginning. He only glimpses, not wanting to linger overlong on any particular newspaper cutouts or hasty scrawlings, not wanting to get sucked in by the pull of understanding a mind he already perfectly knows despite never having the opportunity to read this diary of sorts before. There are pictures that are clearly stills developed from his films, befores and afters, almost innocuous looking images of Mrs. Leeds and Mrs. Jacobi and countless others sleeping in their beds, in the moments before they awoke and realized their world was about to be burned to the ground around them, then shown again almost tastefully in post-transformations.

There is no mention of Will in it, not that he expected there to be. He thinks he should be relieved yet feels curiously empty instead. He tells himself he is not disappointed. Francis was quite good at compartmentalizing after all, *too* good at it perhaps.

This is what he thinks, until he flips to a page where the picture in the center has apparently been redacted, "to protect the living" the pasted-on caption reads. There is no name or physical descriptor given, but phrases stick out in the difficult-to-decipher handwriting—*"the Sun in his glory," "tastes like honey and fire and pillars of salt," "robin redbreast,"* and *"forgiveness."*

Not so good at compartmentalizing after all, it turns out. Not that this is actually surprising either. His former mate was always an interesting study in contradictions. Will is not disappointed anymore. He is not pleased either.

He is still looking at the black box where a picture used to be, not flipping ahead to the rest of the book anymore nor wanting to, when he feels eyes and the air shifts as a presence sidles up next to him. He doesn't need to look up but he does it anyway.

Matthew has been eerily silent since they got to this particular section, watching him. Anyone else might assume it to be out of respect, but Will knows it's nothing more than simple uninterrupted observation. He is almost as much on display here, in this moment, as all of the Dragon's other valued possessions, although as something much better than a mere copy or imitation.

He slams the book closed with as hard of a thump as its laminated pages will allow and sidesteps around Matthew, not giving him a second glance, back teeth grinding against each other in his jaw.

He does spare a second glance for the Dragon poster, familiar with the swirl of mixed feelings just looking at it evokes. With something like a note of finality and a silent goodbye in his head, Will turns softly on his heel away from it and moves on.

His unguided tour through the mouth of madness is almost at an end. Matthew trails further behind than before, knowing better than to crowd too closely or try speaking to him again yet, whether because he thinks he'll spook Will or just doesn't want to get his head bitten off Will neither knows nor cares.

The final exhibit is much larger than the rest, their best and biggest attraction clearly saved for last, and like some, but not all, of the other displays it features glossy, hi-res pictures of actual crime scenes. That and some blocks of text on the wall are actually all there is, no paraphernalia to be spoken of because there are none to be found. This wall is exclusively dedicated to the one killer showcased in the entire museum who hasn't been caught yet —*"Baltimore's own infamous local legend, the as yet still at-large Chesapeake Ripper."*

Will thinks whoever painted all the big titles and captions throughout the building should have gotten a job yelling advertisements outside of circus tents instead. *Come one, come all!*

Had it been anyone other than the killer Jack wants him to get to know, Will honestly might have walked past without caring anymore, the last display still too fresh on his mind. Instead

he looks and he reads everything, wanting to glean as much as he can without having the actual case file yet and at least get something *useful* out of this terrible trip.

He reads and gleans little more than a skeleton of dry facts. He looks at the pictures, however, and gets…something else.

Something very, very else.

One of these killers is not like the others, a voice singsongs in his head. He suddenly has an understanding of why this one seems to get Jack Crawford's goat like no other.

If everyone else in this mausoleum of terror and sadness is the example of what can happen to a mind driven by the extreme motives of rage, madness, grief, or greed, this is the work of a mind altogether sane—or as sane as any mind can be, which in Will's opinion is subjective and debatable amongst even the blandest and most boring of neurotypicals, which this individual is *not*—and not *driven* so much as inspired. This killer doesn't kill because he has to but because he wants to, for the sheer delight of it, taking his victims' organs because to his thinking they don't deserve them and elevating their deaths into beautiful art.

All of this is something Will needs to be incredibly careful about the phrasing of when he shares his observations with the agent later, lest he give the man the wrong *(right)* sort of idea about just who he's asking for help. Will is aware that he's never been altogether normal in his ways of thinking about beauty and violence, even before his blood and slick and semen-soaked baptism in the Red Dragon's arms. A different Will Graham who didn't come out on the other side of that experience might have been more broken up about it. This one has had years practically untouched by the rest of the world to reflect upon it and accept who he is.

The artful posing of the Ripper's pigs makes the Dragon's "transformations" look even more like broken, mistreated dolls by comparison, and that description was already pretty apt to begin with. Will doesn't feel guilty for thinking this. It is a simple, unvarnished truth. He may have empathized with Frank's feelings and motivations, but he has never pretended to *like* what he did with the bodies, especially the women's. Also, at least the Ripper's kill list so far doesn't fucking include *children.* Will sure as hell never approved of that change as the Dragon's methods evolved.

Not that he needs to go comparing murderers' moralities now, glass houses and all that.

Will steps in closer to one photograph of a man left in a church pew with his own tongue being used as a bookmark in the Bible he's holding, trying to read the words on the page marked so that he might get an idea of what kind of message the Ripper was trying to leave with this one. He reluctantly has to take a step back, however, when a familiar unwanted presence makes its appearance next to his shoulder *again.*

"I always liked this one too," Matthew remarks casually. "Seems almost kind of unfair though, doesn't it, how much more attention he gets than everyone else just 'cause they haven't caught him yet. I mean, look at all this white space they left like they expect it to grow even bigger," he points out, gesturing over the blank expanse of wall to the right. "It'll be the end of an era when they stop having anything new to add about him." He half-twists to

look away from the wall and back at Will again. “Something all the others should have aspired a little harder to get to, huh, don’t you think?”

Will rolls his eyes and starts walking away from him.

“Aw, come on, you’re not offended, are you? Just because I didn’t say that your guy—”

“Finish that sentence and I’m hailing a cab home.” If they weren’t so expensive, he fucking would anyway at this point. “Which, speaking of, is where you’re taking me next. *Now.”*

“Bossy,” Brown mutters with a grin. “Can we at least stop somewhere to eat on the way?”

I’d rather gag myself with a bouquet of rusted nails. “I’m not hungry.”

Matthew sighs dramatically. “Fine. I’ll just get myself something in a McDonald’s drive-thru then.”

He doesn’t bring up anything else about the museum, or Francis, or the Ripper for the rest of the trip back. Nor does he push his luck further by detouring again, except to get fast food as stated. Matthew orders extra fries. “In case you changed your mind,” he says.

Will has not. It doesn’t matter that he hasn’t eaten since breakfast, or that he hasn’t had McDonald’s fries in years, he refuses to accept them on principle. He wishes he hadn’t accepted that beer weeks ago either. Not that it would have deterred Brown. It’s just that if he’d known as much then as he does now, he wouldn’t have.

“I had a great time with you today,” the beta says when he pulls up to the entrance at Port Haven. Will doesn’t deign that with a response and gets out, slamming the door shut with a little more force than necessary. He doesn’t wait for the car to start pulling away either before heading inside.

He stiffens as he is pulled into a hug almost immediately upon entering the building, however, and not by the one person he honestly might have expected.

“I’m sorry,” Alana says and lets him go again immediately. “That was impulsive, I’m sorry,” she apologizes again, clearly embarrassed. “I just—I was worried about you.”

“It’s okay,” he says. If he reacted to these things the way any normal person would he honestly thinks it would have felt…nice. “I told you not to worry.”

She smiles weakly at that. “Easier said than done,” she admits. She glances out the window toward where Matthew’s car will by now have disappeared from view. “Was that the friend you mentioned?”

“Uh-huh.” He doesn’t want to get into it further than that right now, especially not as he looks past her shoulder and now sees Abigail standing there as well, curiously wearing her jacket and an odd bag on her arm as if she too has only just gotten back from somewhere. Going by the stony expression she wears as she too looks out the window though, he has to guess she also saw who just dropped him off.

“How did you even…?” Alana trails off as she connects the dots herself, remembering the only other times Will has been out anywhere except with Doctor Lecter and could have met anyone else. *“Oh.* Ah, never mind, that’s not my business unless you want to tell me about it. You’re an adult,” she adds as if needing to give herself that reminder. She’s also clearly gotten the wrong impression about the nature of their supposed “friendship,” but he’s too tired to correct her at this point and just wants to get back to his room as soon as possible. “Just…please be careful and try to give us a little more warning next time, alright?”

“You got it,” he says, not really sure he’ll be able to keep his word on that. Abigail continues to watch their exchange without adding any input of her own. “Um, please don’t think I’m brushing you off now, but it’s okay if I…?” he gestures in the general direction of the hall where his room is.

“Of course,” she says understandingly. “Just one more thing,” she adds, getting to the root of why she was worried in the first place. “I want you to know I’ve arranged a meeting with Kade Prurnell of the Inspector General’s office this week.” Will waits for her to explain what that means, but the hint of steel in her voice gives him some clues. “What Jack Crawford put you through today is unacceptable, Will, and I am *so* sorry I was not here to put a stop to it. I promise you I will do everything in my power to keep it from happening again.”

Will thinks it’ll take more than a little bureaucracy to stop Jack from doing whatever Jack thinks is best, and he’d rather make the choice of whether to cooperate with him or not himself, but he appreciates what she’s trying to do well enough not to argue. He nods to her respectfully and heads to his room, Abigail following closely behind.

The hug she pulls him into is not surprising like the other one, nor is the rough punch to his shoulder immediately afterwards. *“Ow!”* he yelps on reflex anyway even though it wasn’t hard enough to actually hurt.

“What was that about? What the hell were you doing with that maniac?” she asks now that they’re out of earshot of everyone else.

“I didn’t exactly have a choice,” he says dryly. “He took it upon himself to go on a daytrip without asking me first.”

“Oh, well that’s relieving,” she responds sarcastically. “Not like you could’ve called someone to tell them you were *kidnapped,* except you *did* call to tell Doctor Bloom that you *weren’t,* because…?”

Will shrugs. “I wanted to know where he was taking me.” Now that he’s said it aloud, he realizes how flimsy of an excuse it sounds even though it’s the literal truth. Abigail definitely thinks so too.

“You know, for someone who’s so smart you are *really dumb* sometimes.” He shrugs again, having no rational defense to give. “Just tell me you’re not gonna do that again, dummy.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” he informs her wryly. “Now tell me where *you* were while I was gone.” He looks closer at her bag, some fancy one for insulating food inside, and realizes he

recognizes it. “No, actually you don’t have to.” He chuckles and rakes a hand exasperatedly across his face. “That sneaky bastard, I should have known he’d pull something like this.”

She returns a wry smile of her own. “Yeah, in hindsight I should have guessed he knew what was going on with you as soon as he showed up here, but I didn’t figure it out until he dropped me back off and was totally unconcerned that you weren’t back yet. I can’t believe he didn’t say anything!”

Well, that’s at least one person who actually *trusts* his judgement. He’s not sure how to feel about that. “I asked him not to,” he speaks up in Lecter’s defense. “So. I assume you guys talked about me.”

“How conceited of you,” she smirks.

“Uh-huh.” He rolls his eyes. “Look, I don’t even care what y’all said to each other. I already know you’re playing both sides for the scintillating banter and free food anyway, Hobbs.”

She giggles. “I’m always on your side, Will.” She’s still smiling, but something in her gaze turns serious now. “No matter what. You know that right?”

His own smile softens to match hers. “Of course I do. You know that goes both ways, right?” he bounces back. She nods. There’s still a thread of something else there, some expression of thought that both wants to bubble forth and remain hidden, closely guarded against her chest. He doesn’t press her to tell him what it is; she’s not the only one who still has a few secrets that aren’t ready to be offered up just yet, pieces of themselves still being withheld from the other’s scrutiny.

It’s a frightening thing, wanting someone to see all of you while also not knowing what will happen once they do. No one wants to be seen in their entirety only to be rejected for it. All anyone can do is continue to step tentatively towards the light and hope that once they are fully exposed, the ones they are reaching for will keep looking and reaching back without flinching away.

“Anyway,” says Abigail, fidgeting a little before she catches it and forces herself to stop. “Speaking of free food, I asked Doctor Lecter if I could bring you leftovers.” She slips the bag from her shoulder and hands it to him.

“You didn’t have to do that.” He says that, but now that he’s back somewhere comfortable and familiar and the events of the past few hours have finally caught up with him, he realizes that he’s actually *starving.* Whatever is inside is still fairly warm and smells *heavenly* when he opens the bag up enough to take a peek.

“I helped a little. I mean, barely, just cutting vegetables and stuff, but it was fun. Didn’t want to let the rest go to waste by not sharing.” Will is already taking a bite of the first wrapped pastry, some sort of meat pie apparently, before she’s finished speaking. Whatever it is, is so good he actually needs to sit down and close his eyes to really savor it. He might just demolish this whole bag over the next couple of hours if she leaves it alone with him and ruin any chances of having an actual appetite for dinner later, not that it matters.

“This is awesome, Abby, thank you.” She watches him take another bite with a pleased smile before reminding him to take the bag back with him when he goes to Lecter’s office next and leaving him to finish the rest of his late lunch in peace.

Will realizes after she goes that there’s a lot he still needs to tell her about today, like some of the things he saw at the museum, and the confrontation with Lounds this morning. He’ll catch her up on it sometime later in the evening after he’s had a little more time to unwind from this strange and exhausting goddamn day.

He unwraps another pie after he finishes the first one and thinks about how much the strange has become the new normal in his life, only more so since he rejoined the world after his enforced seclusion from it. He had forgotten what it was like not to live the same predictable day over and over and over again until there was almost no point in keeping track as they passed.

Will has no regrets about anything he’s done to get here, or what he will do to keep it this way. He would gladly take whatever else the universe has to throw at him next than ever go back to that way of living again.

Chapter End Notes

The museum in D.C. that Matt takes Will to is a total fabrication, so, uh, don't plan your next vacation around it or anything. The Evil Minds Research Museum at Quantico IS real though (and really not open to the public, so don't waste a trip for that either), and yes, it seriously is named that. Seriously. SERIOUSLY.

#tfw you realize your showrunner really did just straight up call out the FBI like that in the pilot "I disagreed with what you named it. It's a little hammy, Jack." xD

Moonrise on the Banks of the River Oise

Chapter Summary

The Ripper leaves a present, and another piece of the puzzle that is Will Graham comes to light.

Chapter Notes

Moonrise on the Banks of the River Oise by Charles-François Daubigny

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XVIII. Moonrise on the Banks of the River Oise

"This is conduct unbefitting of a professional who represents a branch of the United States government, especially one of your standing and influence, Agent Crawford." Prurnell's take on this is not surprising, nor is Bloom making that formal complaint against him at last. He expected it and respects her for it more. She is only doing what she views as for the best after all, just like him.

"I agree. It's reckless and an abuse of your power, and I've yet to even begin assessing the damage this might have done to Will's emotional state. This could be setting back months of his therapy."

"I understand and appreciate where you both are coming from, though I would not call it an abuse. The BSU has and will continue to use all available resources in times of need during our ongoing investigations. Will Graham is hardly the first unaffiliated outside consultant we've worked with."

"Those 'outside consultants' are normally experts in their fields of study like Dr. Bloom here, not unpaid high school dropouts who reside in mental institutions," Prurnell points out. Bloom clearly takes strong issue with her wording but does not comment, choosing to stay on-topic rather than argue something the OIG rep will simply dismiss as irrelevant.

"I brought Graham in on a volunteer status because I assumed the bureau would balk at the lack of degree and deny the usual consulting fee, but I would be *more* than happy to pay him a fair wage if you're telling me that's not the case," says Jack.

“You know perfectly well that’s not the issue here,” says Kade tersely.

“Will Graham has a unique skillset which makes him a highly qualified asset to assist in suspect profiling even without formal training—”

“Will Graham has an *empathy disorder* exacerbated by his previously undiagnosed autism and more than half a decade of deep psychological trauma,” Alana cuts him off angrily.

“Enough. Will Graham’s supposed qualifications or lack thereof aside, the public perception right now *at best* is that the FBI is bringing damaged individuals to crime scenes because it can’t do its own damn job on its own anymore, and at worst is that it’s inadvertently providing free pointers to possible future killers in the making,” Prurnell throws in, unnecessarily turning her computer screen to show them what they’ve both already seen, the Freddie Lounds article which went up two days ago, shortly after the one hyping up Abel Gideon as the possible Chesapeake Ripper. Their least favorite tabloid reporter has been busy this week.

The headline reads, *“It Takes One to Know One—Or Is That Two?”* Juxtaposed with eclectic shots of Gideon behind bars and Eldon Stammets’ mushroom-covered victims is a picture of Will walking out of the BSHCI with a scowl on his face and another, older one of Abigail Hobbs in hunting gear standing next to her father. Alana glares at it in frustrated distaste which Jack wholeheartedly empathizes with. This is low even for Freddie.

“That article is complete and utter garbage. You can’t believe a word of it,” says Bloom.

“What I believe is not relevant to what the public eye perceives, Dr. Bloom,” Kade tells her pragmatically. “And you can’t say *every* word of it is untrue when you are the one who requested this meeting to argue against Mr. Graham’s involvement with the BSU.”

“I’m against it because of the additional trauma this is inflicting on Will, not because I believe *Will* is dangerous!” Alana refutes.

“I would like to state for the record that Abigail Hobbs has not been involved in either the Stammets or Gideon investigations, despite Ms. Lounds’ insinuations otherwise,” Jack adds for good measure.

“I can confirm that much as well,” says Alana in wry agreement.

“Noted,” says Prurnell, disinterested. “Look, I’m just here to do damage control and make this all go away as quickly and quietly as possible. Dr. Bloom, would you be willing to withdraw your written complaint if I can guarantee that Mr. Graham will no longer be asked in on these consultations?”

Alana appears reluctant, but eventually nods. “While I would prefer to have it stay a matter of record, especially regarding my notes on the manipulative tactics deployed in the ‘asking,’” she states, mouth a thin line and pointedly not looking at Crawford, “I will concede to my patient’s wishes that this not turn into a dragged out affair if it can be settled simply.”

Jack does not say what he is thinking, that Will did not ask for Bloom's interference at all, knowing it would make him a hypocrite. He did not ask Jack to drag him into all of this to begin with either.

Crawford is not going to back down so easily, however, and disagrees with them having this meeting without Will present in the first place. He wants to hear the omega say for himself that he wishes to stop before he will agree to such terms, and is about to state as much when his work phone rings, cutting sharply into the tension of the room.

"Agent Crawford, will you kindly shut that off?" asks Kade, deeply annoyed with the interruption.

"I'm sorry, but my team knows not to call me during a meeting unless it's an emergency. I have to take this." He picks up before Kade gets a chance to castigate him further. "Crawford speaking. This better be important, Jimmy." He listens a moment. *"What?"* He stands, the chair behind him scraping back harshly against the rug underneath. "Say that again, slower this time."

The two women in the room watch him now with more curiosity and concern than annoyance. "You're sure?" Jack asks the man on the other end of the line. His eyes dart to Alana as the man speaks. "No, this is good, Jim. I'm glad you called when you did." He hangs up. "Alana, do you recall a former patient of yours named Cassie Boyle?"

"I—yes, she was discharged fairly recently. Why? Has something happened?"

"She's dead." He allows her only a moment to process this before he asks, "During her stay at Port Haven, did she ever come into contact with Abigail Hobbs or Will Graham?"

"They were in group therapy together," she says. "But I hope you're not implying they're suspects, I'm sure I can vouch for them being at the hospital at whatever time—"

"They're not suspects," he interrupts to reassure her. "But I think she must have been Lounds' unnamed source for information about Will and Hobbs."

"Why do you say that, Agent Crawford?" asks Prurnell.

"Because the Ripper seems to believe she was." Prurnell gazes at him with a dispassionate frown while Alana looks shell-shocked and horrified. "I need Will Graham on this."

That snaps Alana out of whatever stupor she was in danger of falling into. *"What?* No, absolutely not, that is *completely* unacceptable!"

"Have you forgotten so quickly what the purpose of this meeting was, Jack?" Kade asks him.

"I have not, but this is clearly a message and I am not its intended recipient. The Ripper wants us to know he's not rotting away in a jail cell, that he's still out there, but the rest of whatever he wants to say is obviously meant for Will Graham. I need Will to tell me what the rest of that message is."

"This is all your fault!" Alana accuses, voice quavering. "You've painted a target on Will's back by dragging him into this, and possibly Abigail's too!" Jack says nothing, sick at heart even if he refuses to show it as openly. He knows she's not wrong.

"Dr. Bloom, do get ahold of yourself," says Kade in that no-nonsense tone of hers that almost comes across as bored, except for the sharpness of it. "Jack, in light of these new circumstances, I'm going to have to let the report stand after all and make further note of your possible role in this event coming about."

"I understand," he tells her. "And I accept responsibility for the consequences of my actions, then and now. But I *need* Will Graham on this," he repeats.

Prurnell clenches her jaw tightly as she gives it thought. "Yes, I suppose now you do."

Bloom looks at her aghast. "You cannot be serious."

"I will allow it for the time being, and for this investigation only," Kade continues, ignoring her. "Let me be clear, Jack, as soon as the Ripper is caught, or slips through your grasp and leaves the trail cold again, Will Graham's involvement with the bureau ends and your own will be up for review. I would suggest you tread very carefully from here on out if you still want to keep your job by the end of this, and I can't guarantee that you will even then." She turns back to Alana at last. "Dr. Bloom will also be present whenever Graham is, however, and her say on when and if he should be removed from the scene is final. That is assuming she can be objective and level-headed in her decision making."

The other woman bristles. "Of course I can." The effect is not as strong as it could be when her eyes are still wet with unshed tears. Prurnell merely raises an unaffected brow at her and says nothing.

"Alana," Jack tries to say as they leave Prurnell's office and both head in the same direction, towards their cars to head to Baltimore.

"Text me the address. We'll meet you there," she says with defeat in her eyes and cold, bitter fury in her voice.

"Alana," he tries again.

She quickens her pace and strides past him without another word. Jack sighs. They've always had trouble seeing eye to eye, but he never meant to let it get this bad. He lets her pull ahead, though he's in a hurry to get to the body himself.

He's twisted himself into a position he may not be able to untwist from again with his job or all of his relationships intact, but he can't bring himself to regret it entirely, not when he finally has the Ripper in his sights again after years of nothing to go on. Nothing is more important than this, not his colleagues' opinions of him or even his own career. He has to see it through and just hope he can one day earn forgiveness from the people who do matter, like his Bella, and the lost boy with the brittle smile.

*

Her mouth says, “I’m sorry,” her eyes, “I failed,” and her grip on the steering wheel, “I’m going to choke the life out of Crawford for making me do this.” Will would be lying if he claimed not to be a bit overawed just being in the car alone with Dr. Bloom right now, her emotions too thick and choking themselves to allow room in his head to concentrate on anything else. Interlaced with it all is a fear that threatens to eat her alive from within. It’s her driving force at the moment and the biggest reason for all that anger and frustration. All the self-recrimination too.

“It’s not your fault,” he says, responding to the one piece of communication she’s given verbally and intentionally. “And it’s gonna be okay. I’m going to be fine,” he adds in response to all the rest.

She glances briefly to him and huffs out a laugh that comes out more desperate than she probably realizes. “I think I’m supposed to be the one offering you that reassurance.”

“I’m not the one who needs it,” he tells her honestly. Long, long ago, fear was the driving force of Will Graham as well, the only constant he ever knew since he was old enough to understand and remember his dreams. The Dragon burned it all but entirely away. There was nothing left to fear after that, after *Him.*

“Tell me to turn around and I will, right now,” she says. “To hell with what Jack Crawford wants. They can’t force our hands if *you* don’t want to do this.”

Part of him wants to say it because *she* wants him to say it, but he can’t. It has nothing to do with Jack Crawford either. It has everything to do with the imagery that’s been seared into his brain since the museum, a man’s severed tongue in his own bible, another impaled by his own tools to look like the Wound Man—that one he hadn’t actually seen, but the Ripper display’s generically worded “killed with implements in his own workshop” and his memory of what Gideon had been trying to emulate were more than enough for his imagination to go on.

A careless girl with her own thoughtless words shoved mercilessly back down her throat, and those not crumpled but instead painstakingly folded into an origami anatomical heart. That was how Crawford’s crew had been able to determine she must have been Freddie’s informant even before questioning Lounds. The Ripper has a very particular style in the messages he gives, one that makes it clear his victims have brought this on themselves.

What strikes Will as uncanny about the whole affair isn’t that the victim is Cassie, or the reason she was targeted—it’s that her killer got to her *so fast,* wasted no time after the article went up to track its unverified “source” and make a statement of his own about it. He knows what the FBI will think, that the Ripper wanted to rebut Lounds’ claims about himself as brutally and quickly as possible by casting doubt on her claims about others as well. They’ll be hopeful this means he made a sloppy mistake somewhere. Will’s not so sure about that.

Alana takes his lack of answer for the answer that it is. She’s disappointed and worried, and still scared, but she doesn’t turn back. Before long they’re there, and Will can see for himself just what kind of statement the Ripper is making.

Katz waves, but the two men she's with don't appear to have noticed him and Bloom yet, too focused on their own animated discussion bouncing back and forth. Crawford shoos them all aside to make room for the new arrivals.

"Glad you could make it, Will," he says. "How are you holding up?" Bloom glares at the alpha like she hopes he'll spontaneously combust if she concentrates hard enough, but at least she doesn't try to answer him on Will's behalf.

"'M fine," he mumbles. It's an inane question, one he normally wouldn't bother responding to if he wasn't trying to appease the man's guilt just enough to allow him to pass and see the body up close.

There's the usual "tell us if this is too much or you need a breather" speech from Bloom and Crawford, one of whom really means it and hopes he'll take up the offer, one who tries to mean it but hopes he won't. Will tunes them both out as much as he's capable except to nod where it's appropriate, impatient to get on with it.

Jack ushers them past the makeshift privacy curtain that's been thrown up to keep passers-by on the road from rubbernecking. Alana makes an awful choked, painful sound at the sight of Cassie before reining herself in. Will knows he can't afford to react even that much, lest his would-be protector seize it as a chance to pull him back immediately, and focuses on keeping blank almost more than he focuses on the corpse itself, at first.

Impossible not to think of Abigail at an initial glance. Cassie fits the profile of her dad's victims, which Will assumes is a happy coincidence and not an intentional part of the Ripper's design, but the artful way her body is posed and impaled on the stag's head is no coincidence. Nor are the carefully cut shards of reflective glass inserted into her eye sockets, curiously inset in a manner Will has never seen before.

"He took her eyes," he notes aloud. "Francis would only fit the mirrors over them. He wasn't interested in trophies." The killer took her lungs too, from the looks of it. "He let her blood run to waste though, wasn't collecting it like Hobbs would have done. Didn't honor every part of her either, he was, um, *choosy* about which parts he wanted." He circles carefully around the girl who used to be so boisterous and obnoxious in life, now serenely beautiful and haunting in death. "Now *this,* this is how you pay an homage," he whispers.

"An homage?" Jack questions. "We thought it was mockery. Or some kind of petulant statement about Gideon's work copying his."

"Oh, it is a mockery," Will agrees. "Of you. Of them. Of *her.* But it's also, um…" How to explain? "There's ripping off someone else's work, and then there's elevating it. This is the latter. And despite being drawn from inspiration by two very different killers, it's far simpler in its elegance than what either of them would have come up with on their own." Cleaner. Bolder. Hobbs obliterated girls from existence and Frank made gory messes of entire families inside their own homes, but neither of them giftwrapped bodies out in the open for someone to find. It's almost considerate, from a certain point of view. Not one Cassie or her family or even the poor, unlucky son of a bitch who found and reported her would share, most likely.

“Elegance,” Jack repeats. *Fuck.* Will doesn’t turn around to see what expressions either him or Alana are making.

“He thinks it’s elegant,” Will backpedals a bit. “I mean, that’s his entire MO, right? ‘I’m better than everyone.’” These people, his victims, all debased themselves in some fashion. The Ripper merely presents them as they truly are and tries to make something beautiful out of it. Really, what’s so hard about that to understand?

Cassie’s empty sockets reflect his own gaze back up at him, silently demanding to be understood and telling him in turn, *“I see you.”* He swallows, not sure how comfortable he is with the thought of being *seen.*

“What do you make of him paying ‘homage’ to both Dolarhyde and Garret Jacob Hobbs, Will?” Crawford asks him. Alana makes a noise like she has her own thoughts about that, but keeps them to herself. “Is he trying to tell you something, or Abigail, or both of you?”

“Not Abigail,” Will answers that one easily enough. “If he reads Lounds’ articles regularly, which I’m sure he does, then he’s also familiar enough with her particular, ah, *writing style* by now to be able to pick out the facts from the spurious dross she words just differently and oh-so-carefully enough to avoid getting sued for libel. He’d know that while Abigail would never see this up close, I would.”

“Then why emulate her father at all?” It’s Alana’s voice that asks this time.

Because she is my twin, he thinks. “Because he knows she’s important to me.” *Because he sees us both, even if it’s only me he’s trying to impress.* “He wants me to know I have his attention now as much as he has mine, and that he’ll be observing me just as I’m observing him. Who I’m connected with is something he wouldn’t be able to help but notice.”

“So he might go after her to get to you, or just go for you directly. You’re both still in just as much danger either way.” Will does turn to look at Alana then. The worry and fear are still there, though so is a bit of intrigue and fascination at getting to actually see Will in his new role even if she disapproves of it.

Will shakes his head. “He won’t come after us. He’s not threatening us.”

“Will, he killed someone you knew, someone who once slept right down the hall from you and Abigail,” the psychiatrist points out. “In the same manner…your mate and Abigail’s father once claimed their own victims,” she adds after a note of hesitation.

“He killed someone who spread lies about the both of us and did nothing to hide her dislike of me,” he points out right back and just as pragmatically. Never has Will been grateful for the fact that he’s almost never alone anymore, but with his whereabouts constantly accounted for by someone, he can at least be certain they won’t try to blame him for Cassie’s death. “He may even see it as a courtesy. Think of this as his way of saying *‘hello,’* nothing more.”

There’s that desperate huff of laughter again. He hopes Alana won’t forget how to laugh normally by the end of all this. She doesn’t deserve that.

“Will, I’m gonna need a little more than a ‘hello’ to work with,” Jack speaks up again finally.

“I’ve already told you what little I can glean from this,” Will shrugs. “Without seeing that file yet, without *knowing* him, I don’t have much else to go on.”

“It’s in my car. I’ll get it to you before you leave.” Alana purses her lips and again keeps whatever protests she’s dying to make to herself for Will’s sake. She thinks them, however. *Loudly.* “Now, you seem pretty confident this wasn’t a threat against you, Will,” Jack continues, either unknowing or uncaring of Alana’s telepathic assaults being thrown in his general direction. “But there’s a reason you believe that, and I need you to articulate for me what that reason is.”

“Jack,” Alana voices sharply in warning. “Don’t push.”

“It’s okay.” Will rolls his bottom lip into his mouth, thinking. “I’m not sure *how* to articulate it better. It’s not something I know, it’s just…a feeling.”

“We’re gonna need more than ‘just a feeling’ as well if we want to catch this guy, son. Help me understand what you’re seeing here.” Will wonders, if he were a little older and actually under Jack’s employ, how quickly the man would lose the fatherly “accommodating” tone and really let the frustration he knows is lurking just under the surface show.

“Starting to recognize the drawbacks of using empathy as a tool, Jack?” Alana asks him archly.

“Look, I’m not a magic-eight ball you can shake until you get the answers you want *or* a fluffy bunny in need of constant coddling,” Will snaps at both of them, getting fed up himself. “Just give me the damn file already and I’ll tell you what I think if something else jumps out at me.”

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“And how did you respond to that?” Hannibal asks at what appears to be the conclusion of the day’s recounted events.

“I gave him the damn file and shut up,” Jack chortles, spearing a bite of tenderloin onto his fork and bringing it to his lips. “Mm, this is marvelous.”

Hannibal acknowledges the praise with a slight tip of his head. “You don’t strike me as a man who would brook much backtalk from his employees. Why is Will the exception?”

“Could be because he’s not my employee, for one. Anything Will does to help out the cause is entirely his choice. I gotta respect that.”

“The cause of catching the Chesapeake Ripper,” Hannibal clarifies. How fortuitous and timely this acquaintanceship he’s begun to cultivate with the man has been. He did not even have to go the potentially suspect route of seeking Crawford out himself; the FBI agent had sought him soon after they met properly several weeks ago, on the morning Abigail and Will were discovered missing on their little nighttime escapade.

He'd said at the time that he wanted to get to know the colleague Dr. Bloom admired so much as to trust implicitly with the partial, if unofficial, care of one of her own patients, though it had been obvious, of course, that the other man would not have cared had that patient been anyone other than Will Graham. He saw in Lecter the potential ally with an in to Will Graham he knew he could not truly have in Dr. Bloom. Jack Crawford is nothing if not an excellent and cunning opportunist. There have been many chats between them since then, though this is only their second dinner.

This is not the first time conversation between them has cycled back to Will, though Crawford does not give pertinent details of the cases the omega has assisted on—not that he needs them when Will has no such compunctions about divulging what he's seen anyway—and Lecter does not reveal anything which Will or even Bloom might view as a betrayal of trust.

After a bit of companionable silence as they eat, it is Crawford who picks up the thread once more. "I really give you the impression of someone who's a hardass?" he asks with a little smirk before taking a sip of his wine. Hannibal returns it in kind.

"You give me the impression of a man who is deeply driven, at times perhaps singularly, on a particular plan of action and will see it through to its bitterest end, either when the task has been finished, or it has finished with you. Goal-oriented is the term I believe might best describe you."

"Well hell, that's the nicest way anybody's ever said I'm a hardass. I may have to borrow that from you when I'm polishing up my resume."

"Would the FBI really let you go after so many years of dedicated service?" Hannibal asks, curious.

"It's not like they wouldn't have cause," Jack tells him fairly even in the face of his own faults. "This isn't even the first time I've skirted the rules some to get results. It's just that as long as those results were gotten, they were willing to forgive more often than not. Now," he shrugs. "I don't know. I've been thinking it might be time I retire anyway, what with Bella's illness. I just…" He pauses, takes another sip of his wine. "I hope that by the time this is done, my name has at least enough clout left to mean something on the recommendation letters I'm planning to leave with a few schools in the area and the Academy. Some of them, they may not want to look twice at an older applicant with a GED, but they will if I tell them he's worth their consideration."

"I was not aware Will had expressed any interest in attending the FBI Academy after finishing at university. Or indeed, in attending university."

"You think I'm getting ahead of myself, counting the chicken before it's hatched yet," Jack states in a wry tone.

"I think you see the end of your task drawing near. Now you are trying to secure your legacy."

“Aw hell, don’t psychoanalyze me over dinner, Doctor,” Jack chuckles. “No, believe me, I’m well aware I’m the last person who could call himself an expert on what’s going on inside Will Graham’s head. He could decide he wants to be a baker or a florist for all I know! It would be such a waste though,” he mutters, shaking his head.

“The world needs its bakers and florists as much as it needs its psychiatrists and detectives, Jack,” the other alpha points out as he pours another glass for the both of them. “And on that note,” he excuses himself briefly to collect their finished plates and return afterwards with dessert.

“Thank you,” the other man accepts it graciously. “It’s not just his talent that would be lost,” Jack continues. “It’s something in here,” he says, lightly thumping against his own chest.

“Abigail Hobbs has expressed some interest in joining the FBI’s ranks. Perhaps you should be mentoring her instead,” says Hannibal as he reseats himself. Jack huffs a laugh as though there’s something funny about that. “You dislike Abigail?”

“I have no opinion of Abigail Hobbs,” Jack corrects. He takes up a clean fork and makes another appreciative noise for this course just as he had done for the last one. “She’s done nothing to earn my trust or prove herself capable yet though, that much I know.”

“You haven’t afforded her the same opportunities to do so that you have afforded Will,” Hannibal points out before taking a bite from his own portion.

“Dr. Lecter, Alana Bloom told you *how* I happened to become aware of Will’s gift, didn’t she?” Despite it being phrased almost like a rhetorical question, Hannibal gives a short nod. “Good. Just checking, because it seems to me that you and she both forget it was *Will* who came to me first with insight into the Shrike. I didn’t ask. He offered.” He punctuates that with another bite. “I haven’t strong-armed Will into anything he doesn’t want to do since then either, no matter how much Dr. Bloom feels otherwise. It’s been his choice to walk this path, every step of the way.”

“I agree. Will is not one to sit idly by when he could be doing something useful with his time, but nor is he inclined to allow anyone else to dictate the course of his life for him. His experiences could have shaped him into a more permissive creature, prone to baring his neck for the larger animals in the room and giving in to their whims out of some combination of habit and fear. Instead they had quite the reverse effect. Now he is apt to snap his jaws at any hand that appears to snake too close to the reins. That is why he lost his temper with both you and Dr. Bloom earlier today.”

“He thought we were trying to jerk the controls out of his hands, and he doesn’t want to feel that way ever again,” Jack says, nodding.

“Just so.” Hannibal takes another bite of his dessert. “You said it was more than just Will’s talent the FBI would be losing if it failed to snatch him up,” he continues, because it is not in his interests that Jack Crawford genuinely learn from his foibles when it would be so much more fun to watch him dig his heels in even deeper and see where that takes them. “What did you mean by that?”

The other alpha looks to him consideringly. “Has anyone told you how the bureau discovered Francis Dolarhyde was the Tooth Fairy?” he leads with a question of his own.

Hannibal shakes his head lightly. “I assumed nothing more than anyone else might have, that it was the result of good, old-fashioned police work and the tireless gumption of the men and women working the case,” he answers.

“Heh, I wish that were true,” Crawford tells him, looking down at the table between them with a small smile. “The reality of it was a little bit simpler, and a little more complicated, than that I’m afraid.” He looks up then. “What I’m about to tell you cannot leave this room, Dr. Lecter. No one aside from select members of my own team and a couple of my higher-ups know about it, not even Dr. Bloom. It was decided by folks above my paygrade that the public didn’t need to know this victory was won by blind providence or luck more than it was by police work and gumption, you understand?”

“Providence?” Hannibal questions with a tilt of his head.

Crawford sighs. “In the weeks following the discovery of the third murdered family, leading up to what would have been the fourth by the next full moon, Clarksville PD contacted the bureau.” Clarksville, Missouri, is the closest town to Dolarhyde Nursing Home, though still some miles away, if Hannibal remembers the reports correctly. He straightens attentively in his seat. “They told us they had received a phone call from an anonymous tipper claiming to have information relevant to the Tooth Fairy case.”

“Is there a recording of this phone call?” Hannibal asks. Crawford shakes his head in the negative, yet he smirks as though the other man has unwittingly stumbled upon the punchline to some joke.

“No, you see, that’s just it. Damnedest thing,” the smirk widens. “Whoever their tipper was didn’t call 911 or the administrative line for the department. They called the chief’s secretary directly. On her *personal* cell phone. During her lunch break.”

“They sound resourceful.” Jack is clearly pleased to see he has piqued Lecter’s sense of intrigue, and it is not even feigned on Hannibal’s part. “And like they very much did not want their identity revealed, going out of their way to call her when they knew she would be away from the officers and any recording devices.”

“And more importantly, away from any means of tracing the call,” Jack counters. “There *are* ways to record calls on a cell phone, of course, but this was an older woman, about my age and not very tech-savvy. Now, to give credit where it’s due, I believe you’re right in that the caller knew he could afford to have some reasonable doubt in the secretary’s technical knowhow and trusted that she wouldn’t be able to record him either. But I’ll get to that in just a minute.” He pauses to take another sip of his wine.

Hannibal sees no reason to go through the same motions. It would be disingenuous to pretend he is anything less than fully engrossed by this revelation, and it only benefits him to be demonstrably so. The other alpha clearly appreciates the chance to tell his story to someone visibly on tenterhooks to hear the rest.

“So. The caller leaves no name, no address, no other means of contacting him again. The only information he gives is functionally useless to the local department as well. Without having all the details on the case that we did, they had no way of following the lead themselves. I don’t know if he just assumed the locals would botch the arrest, or if on some level maybe he was trying to protect the small town officers who wouldn’t have the training to know how to handle a monster like Dolarhyde, but he ensured they had no choice but to come to *us.* Then he hung up.”

“Did they never figure out where he was calling from?” Hannibal asks.

“Oh, sure they did. That was easy once she got back to work. Turns out it was a local number, *very* local in fact. Belonged to a payphone in the park directly across the street from the restaurant she and her girlfriends were eating at. Naturally, the tipper was gone by the time squad cars arrived on the scene, but witnesses said they did notice the rather unusual sight of someone actually *using* the payphone. No one got close enough to get a clear look or scent, probably kept their distance assuming it was some down-on-his-luck junkie or drifter, but they could tell it was a white male in a grey hoodie, of somewhat smaller than average build like your typical omega or a very young adult, or both. The secretary also confirmed that from what she could tell, the voice on the line was both young and male.” Crawford spreads his hands in a sort of *“make of that what you will”* gesture before clasping them on the table in front of him. “Now ask me how he knew which restaurant this woman would be spending her lunch break at.”

Hannibal simply smiles and tips his head forward in a *“go on”* gesture.

“Unsafe internet privacy practices,” the man carries on. “Which I’m sure their department must have had a big meeting about after the fact, but I’m so glad they didn’t before that day.”

“That was also a factor in how Francis Dolarhyde stalked some of his victims,” Hannibal points out.

“It was,” Jack nods soberly. “It’s all too easy in this day and age unfortunately. Hell, I could do it in much the same way probably and I’m barely a few rungs above that woman in technical prowess myself. See, another funny thing about that day,” the man continues with his story. “Not half an hour before that call, the PD received one from a volunteer at the public library which they all but rolled their eyes at and dismissed until they found out it was related later. They said someone in a grey hoodie came in, made a beeline for one of the computers but only sat there for a couple of minutes before they got right up again, made another beeline for the tip jar for some local barbecue fundraiser or whatever, I forget, stole a big handful of change from it and walked right back out. Took *none* of the cash, mind you. Just change.”

“For the payphone.”

“For the payphone,” Crawford agrees. “And what did they find when they checked the browser history for that computer? Only two tabs were opened at the specific time the volunteer noted—one for the staff directory on the police department’s website, which included names and pictures of everyone who worked there, and the secretary’s Facebook page, which was openly visible to the public and had personal details including the woman’s

phone number and a recent check-in at the restaurant she met her friends at for their weekly brunch." Crawford punctuates this final piece of the overall picture with an open-handed slap against the table. "Now isn't that just something? Someone went to a lot of trouble, all to call one little old lady."

"And you believe that someone was Will Graham."

"At the time I thought it was nothing short of a damned miracle," Crawford tells him. "Theories ranged from it being a prank to one of the victim's relatives to one of the would-be *future* victim's goddamn guardian angel. Until I saw Will there, at that house, none of it made sense. Then, there he was and…*everything* did."

Hannibal swallows lightly, picks up his neglected wineglass and takes a small sip from it. Yes. It does all add up perfectly. This conversation has been enlightening and revelatory in more ways than even Crawford could realize. "Did you ask him?"

"If it was him? No." Crawford shakes his head. "What good would it do to dredge up something like that? It must have been hard for him. Now *that,* that is what I would call gumption, Dr. Lecter." Jack drains the last of his glass. "I think back on it sometimes and I…I mean, can you even *imagine* what that must have been like?"

"Yes." He can. The walk would have taken hours, to the town and back. Little time to stop and rest, the risk of Dolarhyde coming home from work or whatever business he was on early and discovering him missing too great. An entire day on his feet. He wonders if they were sore and blistered by the time he got back, and how he might have hidden that from his mate. Or if Will had thought ahead and planned for that, spent long and tiring days in the weeks or even months leading up to the journey walking the grounds under the guise of more garden labor until his feet formed toughened calluses and the sun darkened his skin enough that one extra day spent almost entirely outdoors would go unnoticed.

He wonders which was harder—gathering the courage to squeeze through the bars of the gate and leave, or the strength of will it took to turn around when it was done and go back.

"See, now you get it too," Crawford says with a nod. "You wanted to understand why I admire that young man so much, doctor, and why I believe he's destined for greater things. That's why."

"On the contrary, Agent Crawford," Hannibal informs him with a gracious smile. "I always believed Will was meant for more than the lot he's been given myself. This is only one more confirmation of what I already knew."

"It takes a certain kind of tenacity to do something like that."

"That it does," Hannibal agrees. He refills their glasses one last time before raising his in a toast. "To tenacity," he says.

"To tenacity." Their glasses clink.

Chapter End Notes

I wonder what Will will have to say for himself in the next chapter, hmm, don't you? ;)

The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife

Chapter Summary

Having learned Will's biggest secret, Hannibal confronts him about it to find out what it might mean for their future together. Namely, if they can have one.

Chapter Notes

This chapter's art print is a pretty famous and very NSFW piece of erotica, please be advised. To be blunt, it's a woman having sex with an octopus. (Reminder: Chapter title inspirations are only picked based on thematic or symbolic relevance, or just cuz the author was feelin' it while he was writing. There are no octopuses in this story, I promise. It's not that kind of party.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XIX. The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife

The dog occupies much of Will’s attention for the first several minutes of their session, until Winston decides she is tired of pets and wanders away to hop up onto the divan and curl up for a nap. Hannibal has made a deliberate choice in not training her out of climbing onto the furniture in his office for this very reason—the divan is rarely used except by his most annoying patients, and the only one of them with any notable allergic symptoms likely to be triggered by pet dander is Franklyn Froideveaux. He has a vain hope that the mild irritant will elicit enough of a negative association with this particular item of furniture to put a stop to its continued use, and is willing to put up with a small increase in the man’s already incessant sniffling to this end.

“Alright, you’ve got me sufficiently softened and buttered up now,” the omega tells him with a knowing look. “Let’s talk about whatever it is you want to discuss that you think I won’t like.”

“Are my motivations really so easy to read?” Hannibal asks.

“More often than you think,” Will replies coyly. As always, his posture in his chair reflects Hannibal’s across from him in a manner which could be either mocking or accidental. Hannibal is convinced by now that it has been both at the same time more than once—or

perhaps more accurately, the latter, then noticed and made to look like it was the former. “But you still keep me on my toes enough to be interesting, doctor, don’t worry.”

“I never worry about that.” The younger man appears to barely refrain from rolling his eyes, feigned annoyance for Hannibal’s perceived arrogance. “But there is a subject I am interested in knowing more about which we have only touched upon briefly in past conversations.” Will blandly waves his hand once in a *‘please proceed’* gesture. “You have up to now avoided holding any meaningful discussion of Francis Dolarhyde’s death.”

Will’s expression is now utterly blank as if he cannot decide what face he should be making. It is curiously familiar. Hannibal recognizes it as a mirror of his own when he has been caught off-guard by something unexpected.

“Meaningful discussion,” Will murmurs, inflectionless, after a moment.

“I imagine no matter the circumstances, the loss of one’s mate must be a rather traumatizing experience, particularly after so many years bonded.” Hannibal watches, fascinated, as the young man finally makes up his mind on how to feel.

Will laughs, just once, a quick, dark, rich sound that causes the hairs at the back of Hannibal’s neck to stand pleasantly on end. He does not shy away from eye contact with Hannibal the way he does with so many others, rubbing his thumb along his lower lip, enough to tug it gently out of place as he considers his response. It is moments like this in which Hannibal feels seduced, and furthermore delighted by the novel experience of meeting someone capable of enticing him so.

He is not fooled into believing this languid slide into almost coquettish amusement means Will is truly relaxed and unruffled. But he is every bit as dangerous in this moment as he appears.

The cunning boy smirks up at him, sharp-angled and catlike, his thumb still lingering in place for a moment longer, before languidly pulling his lip low enough to briefly expose even white teeth as he finally releases it. He curls his lip back into his mouth to wet it. “You waited all this time just to ask me that? That’s some low-hanging fruit there, doctor. Lazy psychiatry.”

“It is a question any dutiful friend would ask. I am afraid in this I have been negligent.” The alpha leans forward slightly in his seat, though Will pointedly does not move to mirror it. “And it is one you are still avoiding.”

Will’s bottom lip is bitten and wetted again. It is unclear now whether this is actually a tell or if he is doing it on purpose because he knows Hannibal enjoys watching the movement of his mouth. “Tell me, Doctor Lecter, have *you* ever been mated? Willingly or…otherwise.” But for the barest tightening of his smile and a flash of something once brittle, now hardened, behind storm-colored eyes, one would never suspect the sort of madness and past traumas that lurk behind the omega’s guarded cerulean gaze.

Not unless one knows exactly what to look for. Hannibal knows what to look for now, at least better than he knew two days ago. He is always learning more when it comes to Will, of course, and this delights him. They will know each other fully one day and their game will

end, one way or another, though should they both survive it, he believes they will still be capable of surprising each other yet. He looks forward to whatever that day brings for better or worse, but the journey alone will have been worth it regardless of its end.

He must know if the ending he wants for them can even be possible, however, so where before he has often allowed Will to dictate the flow of their past conversations, today he will lead. “I have not,” he answers. “I confess, I did not always connect to the concept or see its appeal.” The omega eyes him, clearly noting the past tense but choosing not to comment on it. “We are discussing your previous bond, however, not my lack of one.”

“Not my bond,” Will corrects, not quite deflecting anymore but not quite answering yet either. “Only its abrupt severance,” he says, allowing the words to click sharply on his tongue and pop. “We’ve talked about Francis a few times before when it’s come up, Doctor Lecter, and I know you don’t care about him or all the sordid little details of our life together, not really. That’s been refreshing, to be honest, since it’s usually the first thing people want to know about me. And now, out of the blue, you want to know how I *felt* as bits of his skull and brain matter went splat all over the faded, yellowed wallpaper behind me.” Some of the put-on flirtation has dissipated, but the ill-fitting smile has not. “Does anyone else know how you can be a bit of a bastard sometimes?”

“No one you’ve met,” Hannibal answers honestly. Will’s smile flickers wider for an instant.

“It hurt,” Will answers at last. The smile is now gone from his eyes. “It’s supposed to hurt, obviously. They say it’s the worst pain a body can feel without anything being physically wrong with you, and I guess they’re right since I haven’t felt anything that’s matched it so far. They also say you feel it the same way your mate feels it, like you’re the one getting shot or stabbed or knocked breathless by a massive coronary, even though that’s a myth scientific studies have been debunking for decades. It didn’t feel quite the way I would imagine a bullet to the brain does, but it *did* feel like someone was punching a hole through my mind, taking bits of it to spatter on the wall too.”

He glances away to Hannibal’s feet planted firmly on the floor. “But that’s the part that’s over in a second. Just a single moment trapped in amber, nothing more than physiology and pheromones telling you everything has gone horribly wrong and then,” he shrugs. “It’s done, and you remember to breathe again.” He looks back up into the other man’s face again. “That’s not really what you’re asking about, is it?”

Hannibal says nothing, allowing Will to direct the flow of conversation once more now that he is no longer being evasive, but Will follows it up quickly with, “That wasn’t a rhetorical question, doctor.”

Hannibal crosses a foot over the opposite knee and steeples his fingers over the shin of his leg. “Did you love him?”

The corners of Will’s mouth curl upward again into something crooked and sardonic. Hannibal has never met another individual with such a wide range of smiles, and almost none of them happy. “Did I love him?” Will parrots back, the shape of it more visibly a sneer now. “You ask me that now, after almost half a year? Don’t you *know* already?”

“In all honesty, Will, I believe the ease with which you can read others has skewed your perception of their ability to do the same. You are far more inscrutable at times than you seem to realize, even to those closest to you, and especially when the topic being addressed is a difficult one.”

Will considers that. “Well, you’re not such an easy egg to crack yourself,” he says. Coming from the younger man, Hannibal will take it as a compliment. “And I don’t see it as a difficult topic, just one that’s not usually anyone else’s business,” he adds wryly. “But yes, I loved him. Some of that was just the pair bond, I know, and even more of it was just good, old-fashioned, simple captor bonding. But not all. I’m not ashamed to admit that it was also genuine, because of who he was and not in spite of it, the pieces of him I saw that no one else did.” He grins wobbily. “He was very lovable, even when…” He stops himself as he feels tears start to form, turning his head aside to rest a finger below one eye first and then the other to stave them off, before giving up and simply letting them fall as they will so he can wipe them away.

“Even when he wasn’t very loving?” Hannibal ventures, but Will shakes his head.

“No. No, no, he was always loving. Sometimes too much. But he was also becoming, always *Becoming,* and that Becoming was always into something…more. More than he could handle.”

“More than *he* could handle?” Hannibal asks with subtle emphasis. Will gives him another wobbly smile, this one much smaller and more tired, sadder.

“A Dragon cannot fit inside of a man,” Will tells him softly.

“Is that why?” the alpha inquires with equal gentleness.

“Why what?” Will tilts his head placidly.

Hannibal tilts his chin ever so slightly to ensure eye contact but otherwise does not shift in posture. “Why you killed him, Will.”

Will stares back, face still again but not entirely blank as it was before. Hannibal can see the cracks in this one, minute changes as the words land and their meaning truly registers.

“I had dinner with Agent Crawford recently,” says Hannibal when the other does not yet respond, both as a courtesy and to curtail any tedious denial which may be forthcoming if Will believes he might have simply landed upon a correct guess with his statement. “We discussed a phone call which was made only days prior to the raid on your home.”

An involuntary flinch breaks the stillness, falling into a far more apparent twitch at one corner of the mouth and a few rapid, fluttering blinks as Will looks away once more and gets up from his seat, his hands clutching the armrests for balance as he rises. He walks to one of the bookshelves and does not answer, his back turned to the other man, those same hands coming up to grip the wood in front of him as he leans against it and stares sightlessly at its array of hardcover and leatherbound spines.

“It was never my home,” Will answers finally with his back still turned, the words dropping from his tongue like weighted stones. “For that matter, it was never Frank’s either. It was no one’s. It was *empty.”* His grip on the shelf tightens. “Full of ghosts, and the longer I stayed… the more I felt myself becoming one. Time had no bearing on my life. While he Changed others and Became more than himself, he kept *me* standing still.”

“Then he was a fool,” Hannibal responds with a conviction which appears to startle the younger man, forcing him to turn around. “You were already changing, in spite of his efforts to bury your potential, to subsume it into his own, and what broke free of the chrysalis followed its own nature. You evolved into something that was beyond his comparably paltry imagining.”

The other seems at a loss for words at first. Hands ball into fists at the omega’s sides. “Aren’t you going to ask what took me so long, why I waited until it was already too late for three different families and others before them?” Will does not know what to do with Hannibal’s statement, how to accept it, and so he bares his teeth like a cornered animal would, not quite in aggression but in defense. The alpha has stood by this point and comes closer, the younger shifting sideways in turn to keep distance without turning his back on him again, sliding until he is up against the ladder he climbed on their first arranged visit.

He does not move again, however, or shrink back when the doctor continues towards him, stopping one step away from too close to Will’s space. His head is leaned back, neck bared almost in mockery of a submission he is not truly offering, gaze too defiant, bent elbows poised on the rungs in feigned casualness, hands too ready to rear up and claw an eye out at one wrong move, or one wrong word, from the other man. Waiting to be judged and sentenced so that he may judge and sentence in kind.

“I don’t care about the lives you could have saved, Will,” Hannibal tells him with real compassion. “I only care about your life, and yours was unraveling before you, as if in slow motion. The teacup shattered, and when you were no longer content to wait for it to gather itself up again, you picked up the shards yourself and fashioned them into a needle to rethread that which had come undone.”

“You’re mixing your metaphors, doctor,” Will whispers, lips still parted after he has spoken, eyes shining as he looks up at the other man in faint disbelief. His Will, so used to rejection and abuse he cannot fathom what to do with their opposite, total and eager acceptance. He has nothing to fight back against and falters at the loss. “It was more of a shiv than a needle though, wasn’t it?” he asks with a note of warning underlying his words. *What makes you think I won’t slide it between your ribs as well?*

“I think you will adapt yet and learn how to use it as both,” Hannibal counters. Contrary to the intention of Will’s veiled threat, he feels the first real sliver of hope since this conversation began that he will not be another sacrifice on the altar of Will’s own Becoming, honored though he would be to give himself to such a cause. The threat had been borne of fear, which in turn had been borne of desperation. Will Graham *wants,* and is more afraid now than ever of his own wanting.

“Would you join me for dinner this evening, Will?” Hannibal has won something today already, but one thing he has learned over these past months is that all victories with Will are

delicate, apt to spoil and go to waste if left to stew on their own for too long, so he must press his advantages when he can for true progress to be made.

“Would I…after we *just* established that I…?” The omega is gratifyingly flummoxed at this request, caught by surprise. “Okay. I get it now. You’re *actually* crazy.” A nervous laugh bubbles forth. “Certified *and* certifiable.”

“Is that a yes?” Hannibal smiles.

“Oh. *Yes,* Hannibal. A thousand times yes.” The deliberate use of his first name and sarcastically overblown flirtation are almost more satisfying than they ought to be if one reads them as intended, clear signals that Will has regained his footing enough to tease again. Except. Except that a hint of that fear still persists, and with it Will has accidentally slipped him the key to unlock yet another of his secrets, one of possibly equal importance to the first.

Will Graham is never so openly flirtatious as he is in the moments when he is feeling genuinely unbalanced.

*

The alpha has the daring to help Will into his jacket at the office and out of it again at the front door of his house, and Will allows it as part of the game. Something has shifted again and now neither of them are pretending this is something else when only in each other’s company. It was always part of his design that they would get to this point eventually. Will tells himself the livewire thread of excitement and tension he feels at finally having dinner alone with the other man in his house means everything is going according to plan. He almost believes it. Except.

Except he’s suddenly faced with the reality as he steps inside that he actually doesn’t have a plan *at all,* has no idea what his endgame in this is anymore now that they’re here. Is Hannibal going to make a move on him tonight? What is Will supposed to do if that happens? What does he *want* to do if that happens?

He still cannot *fucking* believe the man actually asked him on an honest-to-god date right after Will confessed to orchestrating the death of his last mate.

He buries his hands and his face in Winston’s fur while Hannibal makes the call to Alana letting her know he’ll have Will back at the hospital a little later than usual. He knows how vulnerable it makes him look but can’t really bring himself to care at the moment.

“You don’t think she’ll get suspicious?” Will asks after he hangs up.

“I told her you were feeling discomfort after discussing a topic which was stressful to you, and that I would be providing you with dinner and some lighter conversation to ease you from it.” Hannibal does not seem in the least put off by the obvious fact that Will wasn’t listening a minute ago.

“Right, I forgot how good you are at spinning.” Will’s grin is all teeth. “You should’ve been a journalist. You’d give Freddie a run for her money.” That does seem to offend the other man

if the subtle change in expression is anything to go by. Will laughs, already far more at ease.

“Alana will be curious and concerned upon your return,” Hannibal ripostes. “You will need to think of something to tell her before your next session together.” Will narrows his eyes at the other man. *Touché,* doctor.

Will excuses himself to the restroom to go wash his hands. He doesn’t want to wash up at the kitchen sink and give the impression he intends to help with cooking and prep. He won’t be participating today when the point is to let Hannibal attempt to wow and woo him by showing what a *provider* he is.

Will slides into a barstool at the countertop to watch when he returns. Just because he won’t participate this time doesn’t mean he can’t observe. Hannibal asks if he would like some wine while dinner is being made, already reaching for a bottle of red Will can’t read the label on which was clearly already set aside earlier for this meal.

He hums. “Maybe when we eat, since I’m sure you already have the perfect pairing in mind,” he responds, cheekily eyeing the bottle in Hannibal’s hand. “For now, got any beer instead?”

He doesn’t really expect a yes, but Hannibal smiles more with his eyes than with his mouth and sets the bottle down. He retrieves a fancy-looking snifter of some kind straight from the fridge—because apparently a pint glass just isn’t pretentious enough—and pours from a bottle with a handwritten label on it.

“So, you brew your own beer in addition to everything else you make from scratch in your own kitchen. What else, do you mill your own flour too?” he snarks.

“It’s actually a far simpler process to make one’s own flour than most realize. Economical, as well.”

“Oh my god, I was *kidding.”*

Hannibal smirks. “I wasn’t.” He comes around to Will’s side of the counter, beer in hand. “Don’t tell Alana about this,” the man says conspiratorially as he sets it in front of Will, standing close enough Will can feel the warmth of him against his side. “I told her this was her special reserve.” Will wonders if the comment is a bit of revenge for the one he’d made about his supposed “heat partner” outside of the dressing rooms that day before the concert, and how he feels about it.

“Well,” he says, letting his tongue drawl it a bit. “We’re keeping all kinds of secrets from her together now, aren’t we?”

“Here is to hoping for many more,” Hannibal says after fetching his own glass for a toast.

“Just how many are there going to be?” Will asks, huffing a laugh as their glasses clink. “You’ve squeezed the best and worst of mine from my grasp now, I think. What else is still hiding up *your* sleeve?” He takes a sip from his beverage. It is insufferably delicious.

“I will only answer that question with a yes or a no.”

Will hums again. “I’ll compile a list then,” he promises.

“Please do. I look forward to hearing it.” Hannibal is quick and graceful as he makes short work of the food prep, sleeves rolled up at the elbow baring strong forearms. Will can’t tell if the man is trying to make his movements extra masculine and sensuous to show off or if this is just how he always operates in the kitchen. He drinks more of his dark ale and watches him in action.

Hannibal waits until everything is ready and they have moved from the kitchen to the dining room to reveal what they’re having. “Loin with a Cumberland sauce of red fruit.”

“Loin, huh?” Will lifts a brow, and when Hannibal meets his eyes, the two of them share a simmering look. Oh hell, they really are done with being subtle now, aren’t they? Will feels unexpectedly warm under the collar and a low-key attack of sudden nerves.

It’s like this for the rest of the meal, pleasant conversation interspersed with what seems to be far more innuendo than usual and increasingly obvious lingering looks as lips glide over fork tines. It’s both exhilarating and a little bit troubling since Will still has not determined yet how far he’s willing to go with this, whether to withhold or allow Lecter just a taste of what could be, and he’s running out of time to decide.

He is curiously disappointed, then, when Hannibal simply announces that it is time for them to go once the dishes have been put away and their after-dinner conversation has tapered somewhat. He sounds regretful, genuinely for the loss of Will’s company more than any *could be* that might have otherwise been between him and his guest tonight. The nervous energy thrums again, however, when Hannibal helps him into his coat once more in the foyer, and Will realizes that it’s because part of him half-expects at least a goodnight kiss at the door even though Hannibal is driving him back. There isn’t one. The nerves dissipate for good and somehow leave both emptiness and relief in their wake.

Even the drive to Port Haven is placid and tame, comfortably so, as if the two of them have silently agreed to re-don their armors slowly for the sake of those waiting for them at the hospital. The only evidence more may be underlying between them than the people there would approve of is in the looks which pass between them periodically when Hannibal isn’t watching the road and Will isn’t watching the scenery go by outside.

“Thank you for spending more of your evening with me than usual, Will,” says the older man once they pull up to the door.

“No problem,” Will shrugs, casual and coy as though he really has just done the alpha a favor. “It was enjoyable enough, I suppose.”

“Enjoyable enough that you might consider doing so again?” Will feigns having to think about it.

“I don’t know, I might have to take a look at my calendar and get back to you.”

“I’ll await your answer with bated breath.” Hannibal’s smile softens. “Pleasant dreams, Will.”

The omega gives him the same smile to match. “You too, Hannibal.” He doesn’t question his own good mood as he gets out of the car and heads in for the night.

*

In the secret red dark behind his eyelids, he waits, and knows not what he waits for until the alpha pushes up, *up,* and Will groans and grinds down against him. It’s been so long. *Too* long.

Whispered words below him, too quiet to hear but they make him smile and he rides the man faster, taking and taking and taking what the other is only too happy to give.

“Will you open your eyes, Will, or will you be blind?” Will does not know yet and the other does not push for an answer, keeps pushing instead into the hot, wet crevasse between Will’s thighs and making him sigh happily. Will opens his eyes. He didn’t know he’d chosen already.

His lover’s face is bathed in shadow but Will knows him, knows the shadows cast by twining antlers too growing out of the man’s head—*like the ridiculous centerpieces on his dining table,* Will thinks with a giggle and a scream perched right beneath his chin. He feels *so good.*

“A robin redbreast in a cage puts all Heaven in a rage.” Will knows that voice too. Though he doesn’t look away from his stagman, he can see the other standing there from the corner of his eye, watching them rut dispassionately.

“Do you remember what I said to you?” Now Frank’s voice is behind him and his dick is buried deep in Will’s ass, spearing him on both ends. Will throws his head back and moans at the feeling of both holes being stuffed so impossibly full, falling back against Francis’s bared chest as he does so. “After you betrayed me?”

His riding turns frantic, frenzied, and both alphas keep up with him easily, matching each other’s pace as well as his own, fucking him thoroughly in unison. The stag alpha grins lazily up at him and Will returns it, leaning in, both of them reaching like mirrored images to leave red scratches down each other’s torsos.

Francis yanks him backwards again, now off-rhythm, the hard line of his arms around him and the sudden prick of a knifepoint against his cheek familiar. He puts his mouth against Will’s ear and whispers the same words as the last time he held him close. *“I won’t let them take you from me, robin. It’ll be over soon.”*

The last time Will heard those words he had cried and begged, irrationally terrified he was going to die right then and there even with two armed agents in the room and selfishly, selfishly wanting to live. Crying also because he had foolishly convinced himself right up til that moment that Francis would finally *see,* would understand what he had done and why.

They had been dancing on a cliff’s edge, the bluff eroding beneath their feet for years, and Will had known that they couldn’t stay there forever. He hadn’t even wanted to when there was so much else he hadn’t done or seen. He had to make a choice—jump or push. The

thought of pulling them both over together, as Francis intended, had never occurred to him simply for the fact that he didn't want to jump. So he pushed.

"But that's not true, is it?" The man beneath him surges up until he is sitting upright with Will in his lap, large warm hands cradling his face as if to keep him gazing only forward, only at him, and just like that the presence behind him is gone, already fallen away. "It's not that you didn't want to jump, but that you were held back from taking the leap."

"O-oh," Will moans, gasping at the feeling of Hannibal still rocking into him, forgotten no longer with all other distractions gone.

"It'll be much easier if we go over together," Hannibal tells him. "Loose-limbed and free, like slipping into a warm bath." It's the word *'free'* which sings the loudest to Will's ears. He likes the sound of it.

"Yes," Will agrees breathlessly. His limbs indeed fall loose and heavy, as do Hannibal's, their arms around each other as they lean and tip over the edge to the waiting sea below.

He hadn't known it could be like this. He hadn't known he'd chosen it already.

*

When Will wakes up relaxed and wearing sticky boxers, he doesn't remember what he dreamed about, but it's easy to guess. He thinks Hannibal Lecter might have been in it, though that doesn't bother him. It's not like sex dreams mean anything anyway.

He's too pleasantly tired to be embarrassed about the messy underwear either, although he does rinse them in the sink and ring them out before tossing them in the hamper and taking a shower.

There's still time before breakfast, so after he gets dressed he sits cross-legged on the bed and takes the Ripper file out of his side table, arranging the pictures in a spread before him as he's done many times already since getting it just a few days ago.

He alternates between looking at them and closing his eyes as he imagines the scenes and falls into the Ripper's mindset, unaware that the expression on his face as he does this exercise is the picture of perfect contentment.

Chapter End Notes

~~I mean, we can all agree that cliff scene was pretty much meant to symbolize them climaxing together anyway, right?~~ Will boiiiiiiii, your thirst is showing and you got it so BAD. Hon, you are fuckin' PARCHED, go get you that cannidick!!

The Nightmare

Chapter Summary

Will and Abigail finally come to an understanding that something needs to be done about The Matthew Brown Problem. They don't quite see eye-to-eye on what exactly needs to be done, however.

Chapter Notes

Oh, would you look at that, my AO3 icon finally made an appearance in this fic. Henry Fuseli's The Nightmare has been one of my favorites since I was too young probably to have my pitiful, innocent mind exposed to it lol.

Before you get too hard on all the poor nameless agents in this chapter for their apparent "incompetence," a reminder that I employ in my stories the same mumbo-jumbo, ridiculous dream-logic to how easily people can get away with crimes they shouldn't that the show applies to itself. If Hannibal Lecter can commit murders across statelines and still be home by breakfast and Will Graham can glue a dead guy's face and limbs onto a prehistoric skeleton in the middle of a heavily guarded museum in the Fullerverse, then some clever young adults can definitely sneak out while they're supposed to be watched by trained and armed professionals in mine. ;)

Also, I stan for Jack Crawford, especially in this chapter. The man has flaws and makes mistakes here just as in canon, but so does everyone else and *god* does he try so hard to do the right thing and wrestle with himself about which right thing is *more* right in a given situation when they conflict, which is more than can be said for most of the characters to be quite honest. He doesn't have to be your fave, but I love writing him and he really makes me smile in this chapter in particular. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XX. The Nightmare

Things are tenser at Port Haven in the wake of Cassie’s murder, especially when the occasional glimpse of a security agent or two making rounds in the woods surrounding the property gives some of the omegas more distress than comfort, just as Dr. Bloom had predicted. It must be tough on her, Will acknowledges, trying to balance between keeping this

the safe haven it was promised to be both physically *and* emotionally when one necessarily encroaches upon the other in this case.

If he were a better person, he might further point out to her how fucking *useless* their security detail is anyway, since he and Abigail still have no trouble climbing the walls on occasion when they need the space and somewhere a little more wild and less self-contained than the carefully tended grounds to breathe in. She'd tell Crawford, who would also be appalled to hear of it, no doubt, and probably see to their current detail being reassigned to even worse jobs than this one, if not outright fired, and replaced by more competent and observant employees who could all be doing better things with their time. Not only would it be a waste since Will is certain the Ripper has no intention of coming here, it would also make his and Abigail's walks even harder to get away with. Besides, it's not really their fault that he and Abigail just happen to be good at spotting the patterns in their patrol routes and keep neatly avoiding them.

Maybe it *is* their fault though that a blundering city boy with no head for hiking and stalking like the two of them can also slip this close to the wall without being caught. Admittedly, "close" is still somewhere between a half- and a quarter-mile out as his and Abigail's explorations have been getting bolder, going as far out as they're certain they can safely get away with and still make it back quickly enough to not be noticed missing, but it's close enough that heads will certainly roll if Crawford does find out.

Abigail is the one who spots him first, silently halting Will in place with a finger to her lips and an unobtrusive hand signal, before beginning to climb up the nearest tree and gesturing that he should follow.

The man seems to have at least an idea of where he is, though he clearly has no clue he's not out here alone. There's not much to see other than a lanky build and a shock of red hair from above. He's looking where the garden wall should be just distantly within view, however, and even without a look at his face Will gets a sense of furious purpose and longing to be on the other side of it.

It could have nothing to do with the pair of them hidden amidst the foliage in the branches over his head, but with the way things have been going lately, Will doubts it's a coincidence. They don't have that kind of luck on their side most of the time. It's still not the Ripper though obviously. He feels vindicated by that much at least.

"Sir, you're not supposed to be here," a voice calls out, curt and professional as any agent. The stranger spins around to face the newcomer, panicked and caught. Will is glad he and Abigail both have a good enough grip on their handholds in the vantage point from the tree not to fall and tumble to the ground in their own surprise. The voice is familiar but it is *not* an agent.

"I-I-I was just…" the redhead stumbles over his own words as a figure emerges from the treeline which Will and Abigail had *not* seen, dressed in the same dark, sensible style of clothing as the agents sans FBI jacket, which the poor nervous kid below probably doesn't even notice. He even has a fucking *earpiece* on, which Will guesses he must have swiped from his actual job at the hospital.

“Yeah, I got him,” Matthew says with two fingers pressed against the earpiece as though he’s talking to someone at the other end. “Stand down, it’s just some kid trying to peep in on the omegas.”

“I am not!” the other protests angrily, taking a step closer now.

“Sir,” Matthew says warningly, a hand hovering at his hip now, and the kid immediately halts with his hands up in the air. Will can’t tell from here if there’s actually anything holstered there or not.

“You’re out here protecting a couple of murderers, you know,” the stranger says, and Will admires a little that he still has that bit of gumption left even though he’s obviously scared. That also sorts out a small piece of the puzzle for who he is—someone angry who’s taken Freddie Lounds completely at her word. *Great.* Should’ve seen that coming.

“What do you know about that?” Brown asks, still playing his own part of gruff professionalism masterfully. When the kid doesn’t answer, he continues, “Sir, I’m going to have to bring you in now for questioning.”

The redhead makes a split decision then and takes the most reasonable course of action available to him. He runs for it.

“Sir! *Sir!”* Matthew calls out—but not loudly enough that any real agents on their patrol would hear it, Will notes—and makes a show of loping after him for just a few seconds until the stranger is far enough ahead for them to be out of each other’s sightline. The jog slows almost as soon as it began into an unhurried walk that ends with him leaning casually against a nearby tree—*their* tree, in fact—and pulling the earpiece out (predictably unconnected to anything, as suspected) before doubling over to chuckle silently to himself. *“Dumbass,”* he mutters just loud enough to be heard.

He straightens. “Take care of yourself and your friend there, sweetheart,” he says, patting the tree trunk fondly but not looking up into its branches. “Never know who might be lurking around.”

He saunters away at the same unhurried pace in the direction the stranger went, whistling bird noises as he goes. Will and Abigail wait until it has long since faded from hearing before they eventually climb down and sneak back over the wall.

*

“We have to tell Dr. Bloom,” says Abigail, pacing agitated circles around the koi pond. If anything, the walk has made them only more restless than before, but they can’t dare climb over the wall again now so here will have to do.

“Let’s not be hasty,” Will says. “Consider carefully. There’s already an article out there calling us killers. Do you really want to give away how easily we can slip in and out of here under everyone’s radar with the way bodies have been dropping around us lately?”

“No, I know.” Her shoulders slump. “I know. We’re not really under suspicion now but that could always change. We don’t need to give them more fuel if it does. It’s just…*grawh!”* She snarls her frustration loudly, hand forming into a fist as if she longs to hit something, but unfortunately there’s nothing within reach. “I just *can’t stand this* waiting around for him to do something, okay? And he *is,* Will. Going to do something *awful.* Tell me I’m not the only one who gets that vibe off him.”

“You’re not,” Will admits quietly. “I still don’t think he necessarily means harm to either of us, but that doesn’t suggest he means well either.”

“Let’s be real first of all, Will, it’s not *us* he means anything toward. It’s you. I might as well not exist to this guy, and honestly? It’s almost relieving because his dial seems to be stuck on either zero or eleven with no fucking in between.” A smile spasms on Will’s lips. “I’m serious though, we can’t keep doing nothing here.”

Will frowns consideringly, knowing that she’s right, but makes no practical suggestions of his own. Not that Abigail expected him to. She’s got the pragmatist side to being a survivor down, but Will? Will is a dreamer—not in the sense that he’s a flighty hippie, but in the sense that he overthinks and overcomplicates everything while worrying about none of it. She knows that he hasn’t let on to anyone else yet that he and Brown are not as chummy as he let it seem after that impromptu drive to D.C. because he likes when something unexpected happens, even when he doesn’t like the company that brings it. He’s more *curious* about what Brown will do than afraid.

She won’t go to Bloom behind his back, but she doesn’t need to. She just needs to nudge a little so that he’s *feeling* more than he’s thinking. “Will, he scares me. *A lot,”* she says, and it’s almost surprising how little she has to force her voice to quaver. “We had no idea he was out there today until he showed himself, which he probably did on purpose *because* we’d see him. How many times has he been out there watching *without* us knowing? He’s stalking you, and even worse, he’s concerningly good at it.”

“Alright, first and least, no more hopping over the wall until we’re sure he’s no longer a problem.” Abigail gives him a deeply unimpressed look as if to say, *‘well, duh.’* He snorts, but then his own expression turns soft and serious. “Second, I am not going to let anything happen to you, Abbs. I *promise* you that.”

“How many times do I have to keep saying I’m not worried for me?” she asks, reaching the limit to her patience. It’s an awful testament to how broken her best friend is, that he seems to only know how to contextualize this in terms of her safety rather than his own, but she can use that too, and without having to be dishonest. “He is hyperfixated on you, Will, and that *fucking terrifies me* because…” She pauses, eyes wet, having to gather herself and pull back a little from the dark place she honestly didn’t have to dig too deeply to reach. “Because even just seeing it from the outside looking in this time, it feels *very* familiar.”

There it is. His eyes meet hers and she gets to witness the subtle, almost uncanny change as they flicker into a reflection of her own haunted memories. “Okay.” He swallows. “Okay, we’ll tell her, but we need to be careful about how much we say. Just follow my lead.”

The story they spin for Alana is that they saw two young men arguing in the woods from inside the grounds and therefore didn't hear what was said. They give each man's description, however, with Will feigning a note of hesitation before he says that the brunet looked like he might have been the guy he went out with once, but he couldn't be sure from that distance.

Alana looks grim and concerned by the descriptions of both men, not just Matthew's, but she doesn't say why before calling Jack straight away.

It takes some time, but within three hours she and the omegas are at the bureau on one side of a two-way mirror, looking into an interrogation room with Jack Crawford and Matthew Brown on the other side. Clearly, the BSU investigator does *not* play around after receiving that kind of phone call.

"I was just going to pay Mr. Graham a visit," Matthew says, appearing to fidget nervously like a kid with his hand caught in the cookie jar. He's affected the same lisp and obsequious mannerisms as the last time he and Jack met. Abigail's lip curls a bit in disgusted disbelief before she catches herself and smoothes it back, and Will avoids catching her eye so it's easier for her. "Just to check that he was doing alright, you know, since I hadn't really heard from him since, um…"

"Since I asked you to take him home and you did…after a quick joyride to D.C. first, which I'm also just finding out about." Jack's very good at turning the screws and keeping the focus on Brown's perceived guilt in this situation, but Will can also tell by the particular set of his frown and that curious wording—*"I asked"* when it would've been more accurate to say *"you offered"*—that the man is also working through some guilt of his own and taking care not to show it in front of a potential person of interest.

Will doesn't like that—he might have resented Jack a bit when it happened, but it was for a particular reason that had nothing to do with Matthew really. He doesn't think the man should take blame on himself when the decision to accept only came after an endorsement from the psychiatrist employing the beta and Will himself said nothing to contest it though he easily could have, thus putting Matthew Brown on Jack's watch list much sooner.

"Am I in trouble, sir?" Brown asks, seeming to hunch in on himself. Oh, that bastard is *loving* this, isn't he? *Look at me, watch how well I play the part, just a timid little beta with a crush who's never deliberately broken a rule in his life.* He's likely already guessed that Will is on the other side of the glass too, daring the omega to call him out on the disparity in his behavior as well. An admission Will can't exactly make when he doesn't have a satisfactory answer to give Jack and Alana for why he waited until now to point it out, and when doing so might also provoke Matthew into turning it around on him by telling Jack where he and Abigail actually were when they saw his "argument" with the other man. They're at a strange impasse at the moment.

"If you were there to visit Will, why did you never show up? What were you doing in the forested area *outside* of the hospital perimeter?" It's apparent that Jack isn't about to take the act at face value this time, no matter how good an act it is, now that Brown has pinged his radar as someone to keep a leery eye on.

“I saw a car, parked in the trees way out of sight from the entrance.” Matthew makes a show of biting worriedly at his thumb nail, a nervous tic for a naturally twitchy young man who gets anxious about being accused of anything inappropriate, like a dog that’s been kicked one too many times in its life. He is in reality, from what Will can tell by glancing unseen into the man’s eyes, remarkably unruffled for someone who’s been hauled in by the FBI for questioning. “It bothered me, thinking somebody might be sneaking around out there, so I parked behind it and got out to look for whoever it was.”

“And when you found this individual, what happened next?”

Matthew shrugs. “Nothing really. I asked him what the heck he was doing and he freaked out, just immediately took off running. That just made him look extra suspicious, so I followed him.” He cringes and hunches in again in supposed embarrassment off Jack’s look. “I know, that was dumb. I should’ve just told someone, but I wasn’t…I wasn’t thinking. Well, actually, I *was.* I was thinking, um, that it wouldn’t be very impressive to just tell somebody.” Here, his eyes dart noticeably to the mirror before he sinks further down in his seat, as though mortified. Jack’s eyes dart there too before returning to Brown. “Not something that cool guys do in the movies. At least not if they’re hoping to get a second date,” he mutters. He bites his thumb again. “He’s in there, isn’t he?” he asks, nodding slightly at the two-way mirror.

“You say you followed this other man, whom you’re implying you’ve never met before,” Jack prompts, ignoring the question. “In your car as well as on foot?” Matthew nods. “How far?” The younger man cringes again.

“Not very. Turns out it’s hard to do car chases when there’s lots of traffic and you’re trying not to speed or do anything that could get you pulled over,” he says with a self-deprecating chuckle and another shrug. “After I gave up finding him, it felt awkward to just turn around and go back, so I went home, which is where you found me,” he adds unnecessarily. His expression brightens. “But I remember his license plate number and what kind of car he drove, I could tell you that much!” he tells Crawford, effusive and helpful.

“Please, by all means,” says Jack with a touch of warm courtesy that is downright sardonic. He nods along with the details Matthew gives. “Thank you for your honesty in this, Mr. Brown, that does indeed match the description of a vehicle belonging to the man we believe you encountered this afternoon. Does the name Nicholas Boyle mean anything to you?” Matthew shakes his head politely, but Will and Abigail both turn as one to look at Alana. She nods grimly. Well, that makes sense. If the man they saw was really Cassie’s brother, it explains a lot about *his* motivations for being out there.

“Funny thing actually,” Jack continues, that sardonic little smile still present. “We found the car. It’s parked not too far from his apartment. What we *haven’t* found yet is Nick Boyle.”

Matthew’s eyes never quite change no matter what face he’s putting on for an audience, and they still don’t even with this news. Will gets chills from it now and has to look away.

“Well, that’s not good,” the orderly says with concern Will knows he doesn’t actually feel. “He’s probably up to something, you guys need to find him! He must have known how bad it would look, running like that, and gone into hiding.”

“That’s one possibility,” Jack acknowledges, and doesn’t say anything more.

“Oh.” Matthew blinks as if the other possibility is only just now occurring to him. “That’s why you brought me in, isn’t it? Because it makes *me* look bad that he’s missing.”

“You’ve admitted yourself that you’re the last known person to see him.”

“Until you find him or somebody else who saw him after me. No, right, yeah, I-I understand,” Matthew says, nodding rapidly like someone overeager to please any figure of authority. “I’ve got nothing to hide, you can ask anyone. Poke around in my apartment and my things, you know, whatever you guys have to do, that’s fine.”

“The bureau appreciates your cooperation, Mr. Brown.”

“Please make sure you look after all those omegas at the hospital too. I hate thinking about what that Nick guy might have been planning.”

Jack’s smile is frozen, and despite the continued pleasantry in his tone, there is a distinct iciness to it as well. “I assure you, we will.”

*

“Was that true what you said about Nick Boyle?” Alana asks as soon as Jack shuts the door behind him. He nods.

“So we don’t think they’re, um, in cahoots or anything, right? Or do we?” Abigail asks, because it seems like a normal thing someone who hadn’t overheard the conversation in the woods might be concerned about.

“It’s not outside the realm of possibility,” Jack says, “if they were working together but came to a disagreement. If not, they might have been there separately on different agendas which clashed. Or maybe Brown is telling the truth,” he adds with a reasonable shrug. “For the time being until we dig up something more concrete, we simply have no way of knowing.” He looks to the other omega in the room, who up to this point has kept silent. “What do you think, Will? You’re the only one in this room who’s really spent time with him. Do you trust what he says?”

Not a word, Will thinks privately. He also thinks Matthew is either very confident the FBI won’t find anything incriminating or very stupid. He chooses his next words with care. “I don’t know for sure. He seemed kind of weird in a way I couldn’t really put my finger on, but not necessarily killer or kidnapper weird. Definitely an…odd bird though.”

Abigail snorts, seemingly unable to stop herself, and Will very carefully does not react. She covers it ably enough though by telling the others when they look at her that, “His actual words were ‘definitely *not* second date material’ when he came back from the first one.” Even Crawford smiles a little at that one.

“If we were to assume he’s lying, we’d have to acknowledge he’s a good actor,” Alana says. “Could be suggestive of a few things. Possible sociopathic tendencies, for one. *If* he’s lying

about not knowing where Nick is."

"I want to be informed if Brown attempts to make any more contact with Will or anyone else at Port Haven after this," Jack tells her. That's something all of them can readily agree to, but the suggestion which seems to be implied here is that those attempts should not be allowed to succeed. Will should be glad of it since that's more or less what he and Abigail were after in the first place. Except…

"Isn't discouraging him from contacting me again the last thing we should be doing right now?"

"What?" Abigail voices sharply from somewhere behind him. Will keeps his eyes trained on Crawford and guiltily does not turn or look away to acknowledge her.

"What do you mean by that, Will?" the alpha asks.

"Well, let's assume for a minute that you don't find any red flags searching his home, talking to his co-workers, even tailing him for a bit. Doesn't necessarily mean he's not guilty. He could just be really good at covering his tracks." Will swallows. "What you'll need is for him to slip up, and the likeliest way he'll do that is by revealing too much to me."

"It's too dangerous," Alana counters immediately. "We have no idea what he's capable of or what he wants with you."

That's not wholly accurate. Will has a pretty good idea of exactly what Matthew wants, and his assumptions of what the beta might be capable of have expanded since this morning. Pointing those things out isn't going to make her any more inclined to agree with what he's suggesting, however.

Jack has a look on his face that says he knows Will is right but he doesn't like it either. "We'll discuss that *if* all of our other options come to a dead end, but I'm tabling this idea for now."

Will frowns at that but nods. There's not much else he can do at this point.

The silent treatment he gets from Abigail on the ride back stings, but he can't blame her for it. He wishes she would understand. The entire situation changed the moment this became a missing person case. He can't just let go of it now.

Which is why when there's a persistent, gentle tapping on his window a few nights later, he doesn't yell for anyone, or hide under the covers and pray for it to go away while pretending to be asleep, or even question the unfair and mystical combination of skill and luck God grants monsters to allow one like Matthew to slip past the notice of not only Port Haven's security but even the agents who are most likely still surveilling all known exits from his own apartment complex. He just gets up to pull on a pair of jeans and a hoodie over his nightclothes, opens his window, and hopes as he climbs out and follows his not-so-gentlemanly caller into the darkened trees further and further away from safety that God remembers to spare some of that luck and ingenuity for him tonight as well.

Chapter End Notes

So that happened. :D

posts this chapter and quickly sprints away cackling like mad

The Sun in His Wrath

Chapter Summary

Will makes a couple of important decisions on this night.

Chapter Notes

We keep coming back to William Blake, don't we, guys?

A little warning this chapter for a possible attempted assault/attempted sexual assault (which ends in utter failure before it can really even begin, so worry not on that front). We'll call it "possible" only because the would-be aggressor's intentions are left a bit nebulous and unclear by design, but the defender's subsequent reactions are decidedly *not* hazy or unclear at all and leave very little room for interpretation. ;)

XXI. The Sun in His Wrath

Matthew leads him in near-total silence away from the hospital, parallel with the road just barely visible through the treeline, only the light from the moon above available to guide the way. Will has to stick close just to make sure he doesn't trip over any fallen branches or tree roots. He has to assume their being this careful means Matt hasn't done anything rash to the guards patrolling around, though he hasn't seen sign of them since he slipped out through his window.

His nose wrinkles in distaste when they get to the beta's car, though logically he expected this and didn't think they'd stay on foot for long. "Last time I took a ride with you, we didn't end up going where I wanted," he points out, snide, the sound of his own voice strange to his ears in the hush.

Though he can't quite make out the beta's face, he does see the flash of his teeth in that patented smile he's so rarely without. "And yet, here you are," says the shadow man, a lanky shape leaning casually against the hood. Will doesn't bother to hide the disdain he feels, knowing it'll be mostly invisible anyway out here in the dark, and simply slips into the passenger seat again without further comment.

He sees much better in the cab of the sedan, the dimmed dash lights nonetheless bright enough to wash his skin out in a pale sickly glow. There's no need to glance over to his left,

however, when he can already feel the smugness radiating from the driver's side as Matthew gets in.

"Almost didn't think you'd agree to come, after what you pulled the other day," he says as he steers them back towards Baltimore city limits. He doesn't sound angry, merely intrigued and even, as always, faintly amused.

"Had to find out for sure what you're really made of, now didn't I?" Will drawls with sugary sweetness.

"Well, I sure like to hope I didn't disappoint," Matthew fires right back, his own tone and accent stretching out into a deeply exaggerated mockery of Will's own, causing the omega to clench his teeth. The streetlights they pass outside slide over his face and give it a twisted sort of leer. "But that was one hell of a dance you made me do in front of Mr. Law Man. I ain't never met another omega who keeps me on my toes quite the way you do, darlin'."

"Is Nicholas Boyle alive?" Will cuts in, tone now clipped. He fiddles with his sleeve a bit and reminds himself that he can't smash the man's teeth in and cut out his tongue to stop him from making any more aggravating and deliberately terrible spaghetti Western imitations of Will's voice until he at least knows where Boyle is. He doesn't even know why it pisses him off so much.

"Gee, I don't know, I haven't seen him since—"

"Let's stop pretending."

Matthew gives him a long, unreadable look, his face for once utterly serious. It's unnerving. "Yeah," he says finally. "Yeah, alright. Let's." Without warning, he pulls off from the main road into what seems to be a random used car lot, brightly lit and densely populated by old junkers yet devoid of even a single other living soul. Will feels more hemmed in here than he did in the forest outside of the hospital, and automatically unbuckles his seatbelt, although he waits for Matthew to step out first to lead the way again. The other man unbuckles too but makes no move to get out of the car.

After a second, Will turns to face him and huffs, "Don't tell me you have him stashed in one of the cars out here." Matthew laughs and shakes his head.

"You're so sure I do have him stashed somewhere though."

"I just said let's not—"

"Let's not pretend, yeah, I heard you the first time." Matthew stretches in place with his arms above his head, giving a satisfied groan when one of his shoulders pops. "So let's say I do know where he is and what sort of…Schrödinger's state he's in. Let's also say, if that's the case, that maybe I have questions regarding your intentions in asking about him."

A couple of cars pass by outside periodically, but it does nothing to ease how isolated Will feels in this space, cut off from the rest of the world. If anything, it only highlights how well-camouflaged they are, one well-used Jeep with the engine and headlights cut off in a sea of

other mid-range vehicles, nothing to make it stand out or give anyone cause to look closely enough to see that there are people inside. “My intentions?”

“Why so interested? You don’t even know this guy personally.”

“Neither do you, yet it didn’t stop you. No personal motive, even if he is tangentially related to the case I’m working on and you find *that* all sorts of interesting.” It’s simple enough to see when Will looks at it from the right angle. “Opportunity. You did it simply because you knew you could do it and get away with it, right under the FBI’s nose.”

“And you came out with me tonight because you still don’t know whose side you’re on yet, do you?” Matthew grins again, but in this shadowed lighting, it looks more like a sneer. “You don’t give a shit about some dumbass alpha runt who wouldn’t know his own dick from his belt buckle. I thought we said *stop* pretending, but you’re still sitting here trying to convince yourself you’re one of the *good guys* now, aren’t you, sweetheart?” He leans in closer to Will, over the center console. “You’ll be a lot more at peace with yourself when you stop fighting it and just admit what we both know you really came out here tonight looking for,” he murmurs, trailing one finger lightly over Will’s upper arm.

Will doesn’t even jerk away from it immediately, a curious giddiness building up in him now without warning until he releases it in harsh, echoing ripples of laughter, loud and sudden enough that Matthew’s face twitches in surprise and he straightens up a little in his seat.

“Oh my god,” Will says breathlessly, thoughtlessly as he forgets in his mirth that this is perhaps one of those times when he should at least *try* to censor himself just a little bit, “I forget when you’re not right in front of me sometimes just how fucking delusional you are.”

The ever-present smile is still in its accustomed spot on his chin, faintly, as Brown’s facial muscles never quite seem to let it go even in their most natural resting pose, but it’s absent from his eyes. His hand falls smoothly from Will’s arm back down to his own side as he straightens back further. Will’s sense of self-preservation also kicks back online and starts buzzing ominously. He straightens as well, fiddling nervously with his sleeve again.

“It’s the Ripper, isn’t it,” he almost doesn’t hear over the buzzing in his head. Even then, he has trouble making sense of the words, as if they didn’t quite parse correctly in his brain.

“Huh? Is what the Ripper?”

“Fuck me, it is,” Brown continues instead of answering, giving a quiet chuckle that sounds more hollow and bitter than anything Will has ever heard pass the beta’s lips. “Never thought I’d find myself legitimately feeling cucked by one of my own goddamn idols, but here we fucking are.”

Will leans away until he feels his back press against the glass of the passenger window, incrementally slow in his movements because he knows the moment he actively decides to give flight, the other man will have no choice, his own innate chase response automatically triggered. Betas like Matthew are really not so different from their alphan or omegan counterparts, a little freer to pursue their own desires without the same clouded hormones from heats or ruts perhaps, but *all* humans have the same hunter or hunted instincts buried

deep down, that capacity to be either predator or prey, and Matthew's already demonstrated more than once his predilection for the former. Will resents being made once again in his life to feel like the latter. It itches under his skin like an ill-worn suit.

"You know, I don't blame you," Matt carries on, seeming to be oblivious to Will's own inner plight. "What's a little time and attention from me when that guy's eye for gift-giving is so *on-point?"* He giggles at his own pun, which only makes the prickling hairs on the back of Will's neck stand higher. The layers of Matthew's person suit are falling away faster than Will ever wanted to see, all that bravado and smirking humor flaking and peeling away to reveal the grinning skull underneath, the pitiful little thing desperate and starved for attention laid bare.

"That's why you were wrong when you said it wasn't personal, me taking the Boyle kid. Just a little wrong," he adds, soothing some imaginary sting as if *that's* what bothers Will in all this. He also isn't bothering to be circumspect anymore, confessing so easily. "It *is* personal. It's for you! I wanted to make you a present too, something really special to show you I also have what it takes to give you what you need." He's leaning into Will's space again on this final statement with a kind of manic energy, reaching to touch, reaching maybe to *show* just how "special" he wants to make Will feel.

For almost a whole tenth of a second, Will considers it. Not *actually* accepting what the other man has to offer, but at least giving the appearance of doing so for right now. Survive by just letting it happen, *just this once,* giving the other man whatever he wants in this moment, a reassuring touch, even turning over and opening his legs if that's what Matthew's jealousy and greed demands from him, so that maybe he can leave this car tonight with everything but his dignity still intact. So that maybe he can still learn where Nick Boyle, *who might actually still be alive,* is being hidden away and actually save him. So that maybe, maybe, *maybe*...

For a whole tenth of a second, Will thinks about it. At two-tenths, the reassuring weight of metal, warming against the skin of his inner arm since before he left Port Haven, slides into his waiting palm. At two-tenths, the cap is gone, popped off by his thumb on the way down, and the blade is gliding cleanly through Matthew's cheek, from the corner of his permanent crooked smile down to his bottom jawbone somewhere roughly below his ear while his mouth is still forming the word *"need,"* while Will's left hand fumbles for the car door handle behind him and, upon finding it, yanks up, the momentum and weight of his shoulders braced against the door sending him tumbling out backwards onto the loose gravel and pavement below.

He lands on his tailbone and his elbow but manages to twist during the fall just right enough to not also land on his head, a little nauseous and dizzy from the sudden rush of vertigo but not from a concussion thankfully, and scrambles to turn over and get on his feet before the shocked, inhuman sound of agony inside the car gives way to garbled cursing.

Will does not run. There are too many hasty mistakes easily made, trying to run and hide amidst the other cars in the few precious seconds Matthew is distracted enough. Better to stand his ground right here.

Matthew is sensible enough to get out of the car from his own side rather than crawl out through the open end where Will waits with blade still in hand. He takes his time walking

around the front of the car and stops where the hood meets the windshield on the passenger side when Will visibly readies his stance, shifting in preparation to start slashing again the moment Matthew gets close enough. “Come on, just another step,” Will coaxes tauntingly. He doesn’t feel even a bit reckless for saying it. His hand is steady, mind clear, adrenaline buzzing. He feels righteous. “We’ll see if you can wrestle it out of my hand before I nick an artery. There are *so* many places a human body can bleed out from in just minutes. It only takes one.”

“You—” Blood dribbles and seeps out of Matthew’s ravaged face in a dark, jagged half-frown. He turns his head and spits a glob of it out onto the pavement. *“You really are something,”* he mutters around the pain, still managing to sound a bit awed even with his throat raw from earlier screaming and his words still cottony and garbled. Will must have nicked his tongue too. “Is that—is that *a scalpel?* Where the fuck did you get one?”

“I have my resources.” He’d stolen it off of Hannibal’s drawing desk during their last session, shortly after the day of Brown’s interview at Quantico. “Now, I’m going to ask you this one time,” he tells him, head cocked to one side, eyebrow raised. “Are you ready to take the *fucking hint* yet, Matthew Brown?”

Matthew tries to laugh, but smiling at all is clearly much too painful with half of his face ripped open and he ends up mostly coughing and spitting up more blood instead.

“You should go get that looked at before you pass out,” Will tells him blandly. “Or, if you really want to do me a favor, pass out *while* you’re behind the wheel going above the speed limit. Preferably time it so you end up flying over a bridge or wrapped up tight around a tree like a stretched-out taffy chew.”

Matthew looks pointedly around the lot they’re standing in as if asking how Will intends to get out of here on his own. Obviously, if he knew how to drive he’d simply take Brown’s car himself and leave him the one stranded here, not waste his time trying to figure out how to hotwire one of the vehicles on the lot. “Like I said, resources,” he answers simply. He’ll figure something out when Brown is gone, his taillights a pinprick on the starry horizon, and not a second before. “Of course, you’re also welcome to try getting me back into your car tonight and see how well that goes for you,” he suggests sweetly, scalpel still glinting in his hand under the harsh light of the streetlamp.

Matthew shrugs, clearly trying to keep his face still and reserving his energy now for things other than talking, and climbs obediently back into the driver’s seat. Will moves to sit on the hood of another nearby car to watch him leave.

As Matthew leans across the length of the cab to get the door still hanging open on Will’s side, he musters up one last twitchy little half-smile and says hoarsely, “I’ll tell Nick you said hi.”

Will watches him pull out of the lot and back onto the road, his short-lived victory feeling hollower and emptier than before.

*

It's not so cold out yet that the walk is freezing, just a little nippy as he trudges by all the cars zooming past. He doesn't flag any of them down, not wanting to have to explain to a Good Samaritan why he's getting blood in their car. And also, if he's a tiny bit honest with himself, mildly paranoid since he wouldn't know in the dark until too late if it was Matthew doubling back to snatch him up after all. With his adrenaline high worn down, he's not as confident as he had been earlier who would win that fight. He keeps a leery eye on every vehicle that passes near him just in case.

He's lucky the car lot wasn't too far from the outskirts of the city proper. It only takes him twenty minutes on foot to reach the nearest gas station. The only customer at the pumps doesn't pay him any mind, already back in their car and away from here by the time he gets to the store entrance.

It's locked up tight with iron bars pulled down over the inside of the glass door even though the lights are on inside. A soft tapping pulls his gaze to a window a few feet down with an intercom and speaking holes through it like a theatre ticket booth. The young man on the other side of it has a dark, short, scraggly beard and a very kind smile, though he doesn't look directly at Will's face and stands a little hunched in on himself.

"Not supposed to, to let anyone ins-side after midnight. Store policy, s-s-sorry," he says through the intercom when Will approaches. The name on his badge says Peter. "Saw you coming a lo-ong, long ways off though, are you okay?" Will's instinct is to nod and reassure that he's fine, but after thinking about it, he shakes his head instead.

"My car broke down a little ways up the road," he lies. He keeps his right arm down at his side and hopes that Peter hasn't already noticed the blood staining the hem of his sleeve. "Can I borrow your phone? I need to call my, um, my alpha to come pick me up."

"Of course," Peter answers, and reaches into his own pockets, pulls out a set of keys and sets them on the countertop in front of him, then pulls out what looks to be his own personal cell and slides it unhesitatingly through the gap within Will's reach. It's almost too much for Will to bear after the kind of night he's had, and he finds he can't really look at Peter either as he takes it, though probably for an entirely different reason. Peter then shuts off the intercom and backs away a few steps to busy himself with something else behind the counter, visibly not listening in as the phone rings against Will's ear, which is just one more kindness Will doesn't know how to handle right now, so he doesn't.

"Who is this?" The voice on the other end is a bit gruff from sleep, accent thicker than normal, and just a touch on the side of suggesting there will be *dire consequences* whatever the answer to that question is for daring to wake him up at such an hour. There is a tug in Will's chest that feels disgustingly like fondness.

"Hannibal," he utters simply, and laughs silently to himself at the utter absurdity of that being the only word in this moment he wants to say.

"Will?" Hannibal's voice is still thick but no longer carries that vague hint of menace. *"Is everything alright?"*

“No.” Wait, is his voice shaking? When did that start? “Matthew attacked me.” He glances briefly to the window, but Peter is still busy and appears not to have heard. “Actually, more accurate to say I attacked him,” he amends with a grim smile. “But he would have…well, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that I got him first, isn’t it?” Isn’t it?

“Where are you?” Hannibal asks, and Will hears rustling on the other end, as well as the jangling of keys. Is he already downstairs? He’s definitely more awake now. Some of that menace has also threaded back into his voice. Will doesn’t bother to examine the warmth it stirs in his belly too much. He simply rattles off the name of the gas station and the address and hangs up. Will taps against the glass and slides the phone back inside.

“I know it’s against policy, but you want to c-come inside anyway, get out of the co-cold while you wait?” Peter asks once the intercom’s back on. Will shakes his head. A little warmth while he waits isn’t worth Peter risking his job over.

“The cold actually feels kind of nice for the moment, and I’ve got my jacket on.” Peter nods, accepting this answer, and trundles off, to take care of something in the back most likely.

Will watches the road and tries not to shiver too visibly. He doesn’t know why he’s shivering. It really isn’t that cold without the wind blowing too much. Well, maybe it is making his face sting a bit, but not much else.

The window taps behind him again. Will turns. Peter slides a paper cup of coffee through the gap this time. “Oh. I don’t…” *Have my wallet,* Will was going to say, but he already knows that doesn’t matter to the beta inside.

“I get ’em f-free on shift anyway. Jake w-won’t mind.” Jake is probably the store manager. Will accepts since it’ll give him something to do with his hands anyway. It shakes a little when he picks it up. Not so steady-handed now apparently.

“Are you s-sure you’re okay?” Peter asks again.

Will nods and smiles. “Alpha’s on his way. I’ll be fine.”

“Oh, okay.” It’s a little harder to tell with Peter’s mannerisms, but he thinks the man seems a little uncomfortable. “Did you, um, did you know you were crying?”

Will stares and does not reach reflexively for his face, since the cup is in his hands, but he recognizes what the occasional sting against his cheeks means when the wind picks up now anyway. “Thank you for the coffee,” he says and goes to sit down at the curb and wait for Hannibal to arrive.

Some tension he hadn’t realized he’d been holding onto unclenches its grip on his muscles as the familiar Bentley pulls into view and stops in front of him. He relaxes and smiles tiredly up at its tinted windows where he imagines Hannibal’s face to be.

The man himself climbs out and Will notices first that he’s simply thrown a coat on over his pajamas and shoved his feet into likely the first pair of shoes within reach, sans socks, which would help to explain how he was able to get here so quickly. The second thing he notices are

how the alpha's eyes are already looking him over as he approaches, checking for injuries, he realizes.

"I'm fine," he says, but Hannibal is already kneeling down on the asphalt across from him, feeling up his arm—the one with the bloody sleeve. "It's not my blood." He smiles, and it's a fierce, petty, broken thing. "He never touched me. I didn't give him the chance."

"Will," the alpha says his name on a breathy sigh, his first word since his arrival, reaching up to cradle his face with one hand. Will leans into it and is too comforted to be embarrassed by the soft noise he makes.

Hannibal helps him to his feet and into the car. Will notices Peter watching from the window and waves to him before the door is shut, shielding him from view.

"Could the attendant not have at least invited you inside while you waited?" Hannibal asks as he gets back into his own seat.

"He did. I said no." The car pulls out of the lot and Will turns to face the road as the gas station steadily disappears from view behind them. "Didn't want him to get fired for being a good person. He doesn't deserve that."

Hannibal sighs through his nose, the disapproval gone but replaced by a sort of exasperated fondness for Will in its stead. "You do not deserve self-imposed exile out into the cold," he says but doesn't argue the point further than that.

"I was already used to it by that point anyway," Will shrugs. He realizes he's still holding the coffee and takes a sip from it. It's terrible, of course, but kind of nostalgic, like the gas station coffees that used to be a near-constant staple in his dad's cupholder every time they took fishing trips or had to move again.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" Hannibal asks, looking over at him at the next stop light.

Will stares down at the paper cup in his hands. "I'd hoped he was taking me to Nick Boyle, but apparently he had other ideas. I knew where those ideas would lead and I…I reacted."

"Does he live?" Will nods.

"He won't be smiling as much as he used to though," he answers, feeling the corners of his own lips spasm up briefly on reflex. After a second of hesitation, he removes the scalpel from where he had hidden it in his jacket pocket, holding it in a loosely curled hand against his knee. It's still stained with dried flecks of Matthew's blood. "I don't know if you'll want this back or not. I, um, borrowed it from your office." He doesn't hear a response right away and decides to risk looking up.

Hannibal is looking at Will, at the blade in his hand, an unreadable expression on his face awash with the red of the traffic stop, which makes his eyes look dark and fathomless. He reaches, not to take it, but to lay his hand atop the one holding it. "Keep it," he says, voice

husky. “Take every scalpel that I own, every blade in my house. Anything you see that you want, it’s yours. You need never ask.”

Will’s head is buzzing again, but it feels different from before. He’s not sure he even breathes again until the light turns green and Hannibal looks away, taking his hand back to continue driving. He has no idea what to say and gulps more coffee down in lieu of speaking.

The house is quiet and dark, but Hannibal quickly gets a fire going in the den once they’re inside. Will is thankful he brought him here instead of simply driving him straight back to the hospital. He doesn’t think he can handle…all of that, everything it would entail to show up back at Port Haven, explaining the where and how and why of him being gone in the first place. Not yet.

“You realize Jack and Alana will need to be informed of what happened this evening.” Will grimaces, but Hannibal is right. He can’t keep it under wraps, nor is there any good reason to. It’s not like he did anything wrong. Stupid and ill-advised maybe, but what can they do, lock him up in a mental hospital for his own good? Ha.

“I know, it’s just…can’t it wait until morning? Please?”

Hannibal smiles, sympathetic without being pitying, which is something few people can manage and one of the reasons Will instinctively called him before anyone else. “Have you finished that?” he asks, gesturing for the coffee, and takes the empty cup with Will’s acquiescence. “I’ll prepare you something else warm and relaxing to drink that doesn’t smell so much like burnt beans and artificial hazelnuts.” Will snorts weakly, though that does sound nice. He feels worn down to the nub, not exactly *tired* per se, but like sitting in front of the fireplace with a drink in hand is just what he needs right now. First though, he’d like to get rid of the layer of ick that lingers just from being stuck alone in a car with Matthew only an hour earlier.

“Can I use your shower?” Hannibal directs him to the nearest washroom, promising to make up the guest bedroom for him as well while he’s cleaning up and getting comfortable. To his own mortification, a tiny, uncertain noise escapes Will’s throat before he can stop it.

“Is something wrong?” the other man asks him concernedly.

“I…” *Don’t want to be left alone tonight.* No, he can’t fucking say that. He *can’t,* he’s not some weak little omega who just needs his…*no*. Just…no. It’s fine. It’ll be fine.

He ignores the way Hannibal frowns softly when he merely shakes his head, hurriedly ensconcing himself in the restroom and shutting the door behind him before he can embarrass himself further.

The hot water feels good against his skin and he decides to just…stay under it for a little while. Stands under the spray and doesn’t think, only exists in the moment. Tacky, rust-colored blood sloughs off the skin of his wrist and swirls down the drain.

He only notices the sting of his scraped elbow and the slight twinge of his shoulder muscles above it from the earlier fall when he twists and reaches around for harder to reach areas to

scrub clean, nothing a little bit of time and rest won't heal on their own. He is not the one who came out the worst for wear tonight, his few injuries too minor to be bothered with and pretty much self-inflicted. He wonders why he feels wounded anyway.

It could have been much worse, might have gone *so, so wrong* had he been just a little less quick, might have even—*Enough.* He needs to stop thinking about this. What could have happened doesn't matter as much as the fact that it *didn't.* It didn't and that's the whole fucking point. It's just going to make him needlessly anxious if he starts building up hypotheticals in his head and overthinking them to death.

The shower no longer helping, he shuts off the water abruptly and gets out. Puts his T-shirt and boxers back on, and with only a little hesitation ends up shoving his jeans into the hamper with his hoodie and socks. Hannibal did say he should get comfortable and Will doesn't plan on going to bed with that many layers on. Besides, the alpha's already seen Will in this little clothing before, when he visited during the omega's heat, and he wasn't a weirdo about it then either.

He walks back into the den and blinks, confused. Some of the furniture has been pushed back from the fireplace and a large, thick comforter is now blanketing the floor in front of it. There are pillows piled on top and two smaller blankets, almost reminiscent of a nest except that they're enough distance apart to designate an invisible line between them as two distinctly separate spaces. Winston has come downstairs and made herself comfortable between them as well, at the foot of the blankets closest to the fireplace, and thumps her tail happily at Will's arrival without getting up from her comfy spot to greet him. Will blinks again, swallows, and feels a tightening in his chest he cannot name.

Hannibal returns with a tray in hand and seems surprised to find Will already standing there, pausing a moment before setting the tray on one of the tables pushed aside and glancing between Will and the impromptu "nest," cautious and gauging. "I reconsidered the particulars of my earlier offer," he admits quietly when Will doesn't say anything, "and altered them a bit after I realized I would rather stay near you tonight, if I may. Have I overstepped?"

Will shakes his head quickly, biting his lip, and kneels down on the blanket to put his arms around Winston and bury his face in her soft, warmed fur before the look on it can be misinterpreted. She accepts this with great patience and snuffles her own face into the crook of his neck in solidarity. Will doesn't want Hannibal to see and think that he's ungrateful or upset when he's really just overwhelmed. Although maybe he needn't worry—the man clearly saw right through his act earlier and understood what Will needed without needing to be told. That or it really is for his own peace of mind, as he'd implied. Maybe it's both.

Regardless, he's chosen sleeping on the floor to be next to Will over staying in his own comfortable bed with a closed door between them, and that's too much for Will to deal with right now. Thankfully the man doesn't say anything else and joins them on his side of the blankets, sitting cross-legged to pull the tray down onto his lap. He brought snacks as well as two steaming mugs of what smells like rich cocoa, some kind of surprisingly simple-looking buttered and toasted canapés—simple by Hannibal's standards, at any rate. There's even a savory treat set aside on its own separate little dish for Winston.

“I wonder if this is what going to a slumber party is supposed to be like,” Will says, releasing Winston to sit up once he has enough control over his own expression to make a sly little smile form. “I’ve never actually been to one to know if the experience is similar or not.”

“Neither have I. Even when I was younger, I formed few friendships, and those with such firm boundaries set that I was never invited to many informal gatherings. I cultivated them in such a way to ensure it.”

“Then you and I are just alike.” Their eyes meet, and Will feels his smile growing softer, shyer. He tries to hide it behind his cup under the guise of taking a sip.

“Only now you have Abigail.” Hannibal says her name with a hint of fondness that Will is sure wasn’t there even a few weeks ago, leading him to suspect he’s not the only one who counts her as someone who might be an exception to the rule. The thought warms him through.

“Now I have Abigail,” he agrees. “And you.” Will stares into the fireplace, not daring to make eye contact with Hannibal again once it slips out. He hadn’t meant to add that last part.

They sit in comfortable silence for a while. Winston whuffs quietly after finishing her treat and lays back down with her chin resting on Will’s foot.

“I wanted to kill him at first.” Will cringes as soon as the words are out of his mouth, having not meant to voice those uglier thoughts either, but any filter he once had in Hannibal’s presence appears to be almost entirely gone now. “I was going to.”

“What changed your mind?” Hannibal’s tone carries no judgment, only curiosity. Will keeps his eyes to the fireplace and sneers.

“It was too good for him, ending it right there. Plus, the way he was *still looking* at me, even after I’d fucked up his face, made me not want to get close enough to do it. I’d have to *touch* him.”

“He would have considered that intimate.” Will winces, but nods. “Perhaps even a privilege, to die with your hands on him and your face the last thing he sees.”

“He doesn’t get to have that,” Will snarls, fingers curling harshly into the blanket like claws. “Not even to that end, not even then.”

“You’re right. He doesn’t deserve it.” Will looks up at him sharply. That strange look on Hannibal’s face is back, the one from the traffic stop. “His death, were it at your own hand, would grant him a lingering influence over your life. A connection to you he does not have the honor of earning.”

Will swallows. “Yeah, but now it means he’s still out there, free to do whatever he wants. And he’ll be smart enough to go into hiding after this, somewhere the FBI won’t find him.”

Hannibal is the one looking into the fireplace now while Will looks at him, their positions curiously reversed. “Those who will be looking for him are quite resourceful. I am sure it will

be only a matter of time before he is successfully hunted down, even provided he does not do anything inadvisable to reveal himself again first."

Will continues to stare, tongue-tied for the longest time. "You don't just mean the FBI, do you?" he says finally. "Are you—are you saying you think the Ripper might go after him too? But why? He hasn't done anything to provoke him. I'd doubt he even knows Matthew exists."

"Does he not?" Hannibal asks. "I would imagine he has been watching the hospital where Abel Gideon resides ever since his work was copied and must be paying very close attention to anyone associated with that place. Now that Mr. Brown has attracted the notice of the FBI, so too will the Ripper's curiosity grow. He must be very interested to know why someone would choose to abduct the brother of his own latest victim as well."

"Perhaps," Will says, though Hannibal's reasoning for his theory doesn't sit right with him except for the last part, and then only if the Ripper does become aware of Matthew's involvement or already knows about it. The thought of the Ripper being at all "curious" about Matthew's actions bubbles unpleasantly in his stomach, however.

"He'd probably get off on that too," Will sneers. "He admitted to looking up to the Ripper when we were talking." He'd also admitted to being jealous of the attention Will seemed to give to the Ripper over him. Will almost says something about that too, but decides at the last minute against it.

"Many serial killers are known to respond well to flattery," Hannibal replies neutrally. "Do you believe it will sway what he decides to do with Mr. Brown, should he find him before dear old Uncle Jack does?"

"No, that won't work with this one." Will smiles. It actually makes him feel a lot better. "You know, maybe it wouldn't be a bad thing if the Ripper *does* find him first."

"I can certainly think of worse things."

In mutual silent agreement, they steer the conversation back to lighter topics once more. After a few minutes, Hannibal gathers up their now empty cups and plates while Will scratches Winston behind the ears to distract himself from the urge to get up and follow him into the kitchen like a lost puppy himself. When Hannibal returns they both lie back against their respective pillows and continue talking while facing each other, Will slowly drifting off over time to the sound of the other man's voice and the feeling of being watched over and being very okay with that.

He wakes up exactly once in the middle of the night. The fire has burned down to embers, leaving the room bathed in darker warm shadows than before. Hannibal's face is partially obscured in that darkness, but as Will lets his eyes adjust he starts to see it more clearly, soft and unguarded in sleep. Only half-awake, Will's mind doesn't overcomplicate everything it can in its never-ending quest to make sense of the damn world and simply sees things as they are. In the sweet and easy peace of pre-dawn, he finally puts a name to what this is, the nourishment he gets from the mere sight of a lax, trusting face and slightly mussed hair.

At some point in the night they've both drifted marginally closer, each with a hand stretched out as if reaching for the other but not quite daring to touch, fingertips still centimeters apart. Will carefully slides his hand forward that last little distance farther, allowing his eyes to flutter closed again once his fingers are threaded between the other man's and curled around them.

As he teeters on the edge of consciousness once more, he feels those fingers curl back.

Dogs Playing Poker

Chapter Summary

> Jack and Alana try their best, Hannibal is Hannibal, and Will is Will. What more really needs to be said?

Chapter Notes

> I couldn't resist with this title. Honestly, y'all should just be proud of me for holding out for this long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXII. Dogs Playing Poker

He wakes up keenly aware of the absent presence beside him, Hannibal's pillows and blankets from last night already neatly folded up and put away. The other man is already in the kitchen working on putting breakfast together if Will had to take a guess. Winston has moved up to more or less take his place, leaving her spot by Will's feet to sink down practically on top of his arm instead.

Will extricates the appendage so he can lie back more comfortably and pets and scratches her absently with one hand to make up for it. He remembers with perfect clarity his revelation in the night, about himself and Hannibal and this…this *thing* going on between them. He stares up at the ceiling and waits for the old Will, the Will who first met Dr. Hannibal Lecter all those months ago, to make his voice heard and sneer in revulsion, horror, disappointment, anything at all.

There's nothing. He covers his eyes with his free hand and lets his lips twitch and his breath catch on silent, self-deprecating laughter.

Will had up until recently been operating under the assumption that anyone who sought his hand could only be after one thing—his domination, to make him smaller and remold him into a shape which would fit neatly at the other's side. That had certainly been what Matthew was after, no matter how much he seemed to enjoy Will's "bossiness." Hannibal has no interest, however, in a collared and cookie-cutter Will Graham perfectly designed to fulfill his own needs.

On some level the omega has always known this, and only now sees the very real danger this knowledge presented all along. For as long as Will could pretend his hard-won freedom was at stake in their game of courtship, his heart could remain safely guarded, albeit at a cost. But now that he can't ignore the truth any longer, his final defense against allowing himself to be courted and *won* has abruptly vanished, unmooring his assumptions and all his reasons to keep on resisting.

Hannibal Lecter has just put him in checkmate. Or in truth, has maybe already had him there for some time while Will kept on maneuvering anyway, ignoring all the warning signs. The funny thing is he can't really bring himself to mind even in this context because it doesn't feel like *losing*—it feels instead like something he hadn't dared to want before, and now that he can, he's practically giddy with it.

Of course, there's still another round left to go even if their endgame is now a foregone conclusion. He's never forgotten the alpha's playful hinting about *secrets* at that dinner a few weeks ago and knows there's more the man is waiting for Will to unravel before either of them will be satisfied enough to call the end of the match. He'd seen it again last night too, just teasing at the edges of his understanding. He's close now. One last little clue should be enough to crack it wide open, and then there'll be no more surprises or excuses left to get in the way between them.

Eventually he does get up and make his way into the kitchen. Hannibal glances over his shoulder and flashes a smile at him from his position at the stove. "You have excellent timing. I was about to come wake you," he says, turning the burner off and plating what he's just finished frying in the pan.

"What is it?" Will asks, seating himself at the island countertop and pouring himself a coffee without asking. Hannibal smiles again at the sight of him making himself so readily at home.

"A simple protein scramble to start the day." The sausage is not quite as fresh as he would normally demand of himself when also cooking for a guest, having been brought out of the freezer rather than obtained more recently, but that is because he could not resist this unexpected opportunity to share what is left of Cassie Boyle's lungs with him. There is a brief, subtle pull to Will's brows at this wording as he slides a plate to him and settles into the barstool beside Will's with his own scramble, eliciting a small secret thrill the alpha is careful not to reveal in his expression.

Will is so close to putting all of the pieces together, it is very possible his instincts are already picking out details his conscious thoughts have not caught onto just yet. Still, he digs into the meal without hesitation and makes noises around his fork that are as gratifying as they are distracting. "God, do you have to be so good at this?" he mock-complains. "Couldn't you have at least burnt the eggs just a little bit?"

"It has happened before." Will looks incredulous with disbelief. "I am only human after all," the alpha admits. "Mistakes in the kitchen are bound to occur, however rarely, even with decades of practice and experience." He shoots an almost coy glance at the omega over his own plate. "Please don't tell anyone."

Will mimes crossing his heart with his index finger, still swallowing his last bite. “I’ll only believe it when I taste it though,” he says. It’s almost absurd, the amount of want that swells in Hannibal’s breast at only the implication of Will’s presence at his table becoming such a constant given that he would be there to partake of even the *mistakes.* Such a curious thing to have hope for.

After a few minutes of simply enjoying the meal and each other’s company in silence, Hannibal informs Will, “I called Dr. Bloom earlier this morning, before your absence could be noted and cause another alarm like last time. I assured her of your safety but gave no other details since I assumed you would prefer to tell her on your own terms later in person.”

Will gives a short but firm nod, only a slight tightening around the mouth and eyes betraying some discomfort and hesitancy at the reminder. “Thanks. Did she sound upset?”

“A little concerned, but also relieved that you were with me. I don’t believe it occurred to her to ask who else you might have been in the company of last night.” There is guilt in the grimace Will makes before taking another sip of his coffee. Hannibal wonders if he feels he has betrayed Alana’s trust by meeting up with Brown alone or if it has to do with something else. The ease with which she trusts his and *Hannibal’s* intentions in being alone together perhaps, though Hannibal knows not to presume anything about Will’s intentions himself. It is just as quickly gone and Will is back to giving his usual coy smiles and dry, sardonic wit.

The call comes as they finish washing up and are just putting away the last of the dishes. Hannibal frowns a little at Alana’s uncharacteristic impatience when he sees that it is her name on the caller ID, but his voice betrays none of his own irritation when he answers.

“Hannibal, I just got a call from Jack Crawford,” she says as soon as their greetings are out of the way. It immediately clarifies some things.

“Has something happened?” Will looks up to peer at him intently while on the other end of the line Alana takes a breath.

“They found Nick Boyle.”

Hannibal memorizes the address she gives him and promises to meet her there as soon as they’re ready. Will gives him a questioning look, but with a dull certainty behind his eyes that blunts the edges of his earlier good humor.

“Nicholas Boyle is dead,” he answers the look simply, getting no more than an accepting nod for this in return.

“Think we could take some of this coffee to go?” the omega asks with a bland smirk and empty eyes, eyes which no longer meet his own as he fiddles idly with various knickknacks within reach on the countertop.

“There is certainly enough left to fill up a thermos,” Hannibal agrees. Will’s clothing should be just about ready to come out of the dryer as well. There is really no reason at all to delay.

Will hesitates in the center of the room before nodding again curtly and leaving Hannibal to make preparations for their departure.

*

Alana is waiting for them by the line of vehicles parked alongside the road, and walks with them to the entrance of an abandoned, boarded up warehouse. From the outside at least, it is nondescript and utilitarian. Practicality with no real style. Will's immediate thought is that unless the inside is enough to be really wowing on its own, the Ripper would already be bored and annoyed with the arbiter of this scene for being boring. The perfect backdrop is just as important to the Ripper as every other aspect of his tableaus, whether for the aesthetic or some underlying message that ties it personally with the victim. This setting automatically fails on both counts, being chosen solely for its apparent convenience and privacy.

Will doesn't know when he starting rating crime scenes in relation to how the Ripper might grade them, but it's a useful litmus when all of the ones he's been to and most of the ones he's studied more extensively have been related to the man at least tangentially if not directly. It's hard to forget his real purpose in being brought on as Jack's new favorite consultant after all.

As they step inside, the smell that hits the back of their throats causes them to cough convulsively. Something was burning in here just a few hours ago. Something that was once *alive.*

Jack comes forward to greet them, noting Hannibal's presence with a look of mild uncertainty.

"I hope my being here won't cause you more problems with the board, Jack," says the other alpha, but he makes no move to leave Will's side and even shifts fractionally closer, making it a subtle suggestion that he is here to provide further support to the omega without saying a word on the subject. The funny thing is it does reassure Will a bit, despite knowing that if the gesture came from just about anyone else he would find it insulting.

Jack is an intelligent man. He picks up on Hannibal's silent cue easily and sees that it can only be beneficial to Will without being detrimental to his own cause, maybe even good for it. He shrugs. "As long as you're comfortable with this and prepared for what you're about to see, doctor, I don't see the harm in letting it slide just this once," he says, the cavalier attitude of a man already resigned to whatever fate the review board has in store for him and wholly unconcerned with salvaging it.

"So are you ready, Will?" he turns to the omega next. In the span of a second, he makes silent note of Will's borrowed jacket, a lightweight herringbone that is slightly broad in the shoulders and a tad too long in the sleeve, and throws a considered look between Will and Dr. Lecter that is there and gone in the span of a blink, surprisingly nonjudgmental but definitely reassessing. Will might have fidgeted if he embarrassed as easily as he once did.

Alana had noticed it too outside and asked where his hoodie was, to which he'd responded vaguely about a stain Dr. Lecter had offered to clean up properly before returning it. It's true, or at least it is the reason Hannibal gave when he made the offer and lent him this one, but

Will knows he just couldn't resist an excuse to see Will in some of his own clothing, and moreover couldn't resist *showing Will off* in his clothing. A taunting hint to the evolving nature of their relationship right under everybody's noses, one that anyone who knows them well enough would ironically be blinded to, taking Will's explanation at face value as Alana had, while those who only know them more casually or not at all would likely see it and assume they're already sleeping together. He knows it's working too when he sees Beverly Katz eye them and nudge one of her coworkers with her elbow as they pass, an older blond gentleman he recognizes but doesn't remember the name of, if he was ever told it.

There's something transforming and performative about wearing the alpha's jacket that Will likes, his body the canvas of an elegantly simple design upon which others will project their own imaginations, but only in the way that its creator wants them to, neither points of view entirely correct while both possessing tiny grains of truth. He doesn't need to look to know that in spite of the circumstances, the man beside him is thrumming with the quiet satisfaction of a story well told without having had to utter a single word.

Will can't say that he minds. He could've said no and just rolled in the hems of his sleeves, not taken it knowing what kind of imagery it would represent. Taking it makes him both canvas and co-designer. He'd liked that idea. A lot. He didn't say no.

He hasn't gotten so lost in the image they're creating now that he's forgotten what they're really here for, however, and tugs the jacket just a bit tighter around himself as they approach the source of that godawful barbecue and gasoline smell, though it's really quite warm in here.

They're given mentholatum cream before they're close enough for it to really turn Will's stomach, but there are no such measures that can temper the sight of the body other than blocking it out entirely, which is obviously not an option.

It's unrecognizable, a charred husk that has retained its lanky shape enough to match up with what Will remembers of his brief glance of Nick out in the woods. That is not what makes Will gasp aloud, and subsequently cough again as the mentholatum is not enough to mitigate the sour burn against the back of his throat after such a deep breath. In a sort of confused comedy of errors, Hannibal and Alana both reach out to rub soothing circles over his back and end up accidentally brushing fingers together over the curve of his spine in the process, the latter pulling her hand away immediately with darted eyes and a quiet embarrassed laugh. Will doesn't look over at Hannibal, knowing any indulgence or mutual embarrassment he might see there would be entirely for show but having to force himself not to scowl anyway.

The alpha's hand lingers on his back a touch longer than necessary, still giving subtle pressure as it slowly glides away, whether in reassurance or the simple pleasure of it Will couldn't say, but it allows him to refocus on what's in front of him.

Will doesn't need to walk back the scene in his mind's eye but he does so anyway. A single gunshot to the chest, point blank. Nick didn't try to get away, didn't have time to do more than glance up in recognition and surprise before the bullet ripped through him. Quick. Efficient. It's not that he needed to suffer, it's just that he needed to die. In a way, this is almost merciful compared to what his killer originally had planned, but plans change. *My gift was rejected before it could even be given, so now it shall have to be a message instead.*

Slammed post-mortem onto a stag's head, laid out just like his sister, Nicholas Boyle was burned. Disfigured. Scorned.

Funny, because Matthew may have been a lot of things last night, but angry wasn't one of them. No. Correction—Matthew wasn't angry *at Will.* Even now, with his face sawed halfway open, Will in his mind is still a sure thing, just so long as he can level the playing field a little first.

"Suicidal idiot," Will mutters, and fights to keep a smirk from forming on his face. He'd expected Matthew to play smarter than this, but Hannibal had the right of it with his theory last night. Matthew's cool veneer has cracked, that manic energy Will had been privy to in the beta's car escalating hotter and higher now with that pretext gone.

"I'm sorry, what's that?" Crawford asks.

"Not Boyle," Will clarifies. "His killer."

The BSU director just looks at him and nods. "This was a controlled burn," he says. "Whoever lit this man up knew exactly what they were doing, how to keep the fire from spreading throughout the rest of the warehouse. Passers-by saw the smoke through the cracked windows and called it in almost three hours ago. Fire department contacted us almost immediately afterwards."

"I take it our prime suspect isn't currently in custody, is he, Jack," Will notes dryly.

"Matthew Brown didn't show up at work this morning and he's not at his apartment either. Nobody has seen him since he returned home yesterday evening." This would be where Will should probably correct him, but before he can make the decision whether to get the words out now or wait, Jack continues. "There's something else you should know. Office upstairs has an air mattress, bunch of dried snacks, bottled water. But no lock. Nicholas Boyle was hiding out here, and the evidence suggests he was doing so willingly."

"So it wasn't a kidnapping," says Alana. "They really were working together. I wonder where it all went wrong?"

"Guess they must have had another disagreement," says Jack. "One that ended a little less civilly than the last time."

Will can't correct them without confessing to the lie he and Abigail told, but he can piece together what really happened here for himself. Either Matthew staged it to look like Nick was really here of his own free will or…*you poor dumb, trusting son of a bitch.* Will narrows his eyes at the charred corpse sympathetically.

He can see how it must have gone down, picture the sugary lies and spun half-truths Matthew would have used once he caught up with the young alpha to paint a picture that would have gotten Boyle to let down his guard. Confess that he wasn't really FBI, that he'd put on a front, a disguise to protect his cover for the benefit of the pair he'd known were spying on them. Tell him that they're both after the same thing, but they need to *be smart about this, I know you don't know me, but we have to trust each other, man. They've seen your face now.*

Let me help you out, I've got this handled, I know how we can lure one of them out of there, you've just gotta lay low for a while and let me do my thing…

Matthew is a skilled actor when he wants to be, and Nicholas was the kind of young man who naively trusted trash tabloid articles and took the mere act of authority and a fucking earpiece that wasn't even attached to anything at face value. Too easy. Will should have already guessed it to be honest. The beta prefers to rely on his cunning, falling back on muscles and brute force only as a last resort. Or at least he had been before he got too impatient, too impetuous and impulsive once he realized that for all his careful planning things with Will *weren't* actually gonna go his way and he let his jealousy drive him over the brink. Will can't predict what his next move is going to be.

"I believe the phrase I heard you use before was 'suicidal idiot,' Will, wanna tell me about that?" Crawford asks, apparently done speculating on Nick's possible connection to his killer with Alana and the others. Will hadn't really been listening since all of that was useless to him.

"You don't need me to tell you the obvious, Jack. This is clearly another Ripper rip-off." Try to say that five times fast.

"The Ripper's last rip was *itself* a rip-off," one of the lab technicians points out, a brunet Will can't remember the name of either. Preller or Gellar or something. "So what, everybody plagiarizes each other now, but only the Ripper is allowed? What a hypocrite."

"What the Ripper did wasn't plagiarism, it was an *homage,"* Will corrects, trying not to get offended.

"What's the difference?" the man mutters. His boss shoots him a quelling look that he either doesn't notice or ignores.

"I think what Zee is trying to say is that this isn't another exact copy like Gideon's handiwork was," Katz chimes in.

"It's not meant to be," Will tells her. "This is…a taunt. He wants to poke the Ripper, provoke him. Draw him out of hiding."

"Why would he want to do that?" This time it's the blond man Beverly was talking to earlier who speaks up.

"Because he's been burned, and now he wants to return the favor." Everyone looks perplexed by this. Even Hannibal casts him a curious glance. This didn't come up in their discussion last night.

"Fire can also be a symbol of transformation," Hannibal points out. "An agent for change."

"Oh, he wants to Change the Ripper alright," Will agrees, putting subtle emphasis to the word as Francis once had when describing what he would do to his victims. "Matthew admires the Ripper, idolizes him, but he's also not very happy with him right now." He's finding it difficult to look at Hannibal, not sure if it's some kind of guilt or embarrassment from not

telling him first when it was just the two of them, or something else. He swallows. “Because he also blames the Ripper, resents him for pulling away what he wants but can’t seem to hold onto for himself. My undivided attention.”

“So you think this is all about you?” ‘Zee’ asks, sneering, clearly frustrated and most likely wondering why they’re still listening to some untrained, unproven nobody in the first place. Will honestly doesn’t have an answer for that which would satisfy him, aside from the fact that he’s usually right and that this *is* technically about him. “I mean, where are you even getting this all from, aside from your own ego that is?”

“Zeller,” Jack intones warningly.

“Boss, I’m willing to hear him out, I promise. But how are we even supposed to tell between what’s real and what might just be wild speculation when nothing about this kid’s methods seem to be scientific or rational?” Zeller turns his focus back to Will before that vein in Jack’s forehead has a chance to burst. “Please, *Professor Graham,* won’t you share with the rest of the class how it is you came to this riveting conclusion?”

“Because he said as much to me last night.”

Deathly silence follows this statement for a painful second too long, before Jack suddenly turns to his three lab techs. “Get back to your duties.” No one moves. *“Now.”*

The techs scramble to busy themselves again, and Jack steers the rest of them out of earshot from anybody else. He looks like he’s half-tempted to grab Will by the elbow and yank him along, and perhaps would have if the omega weren’t flanked by two psychiatrists.

“What do you mean he told you last night?” the alpha asks, face and voice both kept steady and carefully controlled. He has eyes only for Will as if Hannibal and Alana are not even there. “Did he call you or leave some kind of note?” Alana looks like she’s already figured it out, all color draining from her face as she looks first to Will and then to Hannibal.

“I saw him. He snuck me out of the hospital after lights out, said that he wanted to talk.” Alana turns away from the three of them and takes in a shuddering breath, hiding her face behind her hand. Will tries not to feel the horror and hurt rolling off of her. Jack’s face is doing something Will isn’t sure he could put into words, but he seems to be silently praying to every power in the universe he can not to lose his own cool.

“Are you okay?” Alana asks, faintly as if she can barely push the words out. Both of them appear to be eyeing him now as if searching for hidden marks or injuries they hadn’t noticed previously.

“I’m fine.” He can’t look at her except out of the corner of his eye, where she appears as an indistinct blurred mass somewhere beside him.

“You went expressly against what I told you and met with this guy alone?” Will feels that odd need to fidget again under Jack’s gaze.

“Yes,” he answers, biting back the ‘sir’ that absurdly wants to follow it. The last time he had uttered the word aloud, he was fourteen and had just gotten a lecture from his father, sick with anger, worry, and disappointment because Will had forgotten to call and let him know he was going to the library after school instead of heading straight home. Jack’s voice is quieter but carries uncomfortably familiar shades of the same tone.

“Will, that is insane! You’re not an agent, you have no formal training. You’re not equipped to deal with someone like that on your own.” Alana releases a choked little laugh, as if she finds this dreadfully ironic coming from Jack. He glances her way briefly before choosing to ignore it, mouth slightly more downturned. Even when they agree, they don’t get along too well these days.

“I handled myself alright,” says Will, aiming for neutral and hating how it comes out closer to sullen instead, like he really is that misbehaving teen who screwed up all over again.

“This could have been you!” Jack barely raises his voice as he gestures toward Nick’s body, but it’s enough for a few agents to glance in their direction before looking away hurriedly.

“But it’s not,” Will says. It’s Crawford’s turn now to scrub his face furiously with his hand as if he can’t even bring himself to look at Will for the moment.

Somehow, Will had convinced himself before coming out here that Jack’s primary gripe with his nighttime adventure would be about the investigation and how he might have hurt the case, not with how he might have gotten hurt himself. Even more disconcerting is that it’s Bloom rather than Crawford who steers them back on course by asking, “What else happened, Will? Did he say anything that might indicate where he’s gone now or what he might be planning next?”

Will shakes his head. “Nothing actionable, or I wouldn’t have waited until now to say anything.” It’s mostly true. He *had* admitted to knowing where Boyle was, but without a verified location that information was functionally useless in Will’s opinion. It was little more than a confirmation of what they’d already all suspected, and telling them Matthew had made it clear he and Nick were *not* really working together would run counter to the narrative they’d already constructed here and just convince the others that Brown had twisted his words to manipulate him. “At first, he just tried to talk circles around the subject. I don’t know if he was bringing me here or not, but I never saw Nick, and once the Ripper was brought up…the way he was talking about him, the things he was saying, they made me… uneasy.”

“How did you get away?” Crawford asks. He likely has some opinions on Will’s decision not to inform them until this morning—hell, they both do, judging from the sad looks he can still feel coming from Alana on his left—but is thankfully keeping them to himself if so.

“He pulled over so we could talk without distraction once the conversation turned serious, which made it easy to get out and start walking after it got too uncomfortable. I went to the nearest gas station, where Hannibal picked me up. That was around, um…”

“2 AM,” Hannibal fills in the blank helpfully.

“Wait, you can’t mean to tell me Brown just let you go without a fuss?” Crawford presses, understandably disbelieving.

“No, there was fuss. It was just hard for him to make much of one with half of his face torn open after he tried to make a grab for me,” Will responds glibly.

He knows it’s dangerous being this honest, especially considering the twin expressions of shock and wavering uncertainty coming across Bloom and Crawford’s faces, but he’s *so tired* of both of them seeing him as this fragile broken thing that needs to be protected at all costs. He walks a fine line as Francis Dolarhyde’s widow, one where too great of a perceived penchant for swift and brutal violence could potentially land him in Frederick Chilton’s purview of “care,” but this constant coddling from his would-be allies chafes him more and more each day as surely as chains and iron bars would. He just wants to be seen for who he is, neither the helpless omega nor the monstrous portrait Freddie Lounds paints of him. And for fuck’s sake, he wants to not spend the rest of his days in a cage, gilded or otherwise.

He feels Hannibal’s silent presence shift closer, pressing them arm to arm and shoulder to shoulder as if the older man can sense his growing distress and frustration. He loosens his own locked limbs enough to lean back into it for a second before straightening his posture again.

Jack clears his throat. “I’ll update the APB to include mention of a facial injury then. If he shows up somewhere, that should make him easier to spot.” The brief discomfort dissipates into an oddly proud look, like he’s pleased by the reminder that Will is the type of omega to fight back instead of rolling over. It eases another knot of tension Will had been holding onto.

“It might be a long shot, Agent Crawford, but I would recommend thoroughly checking the local clinics and hospitals nearby as well, just in case,” Lecter suggests.

“This fixation Matthew Brown has on the Ripper,” Alana speaks up. The others turn to look at her expectantly. “Maybe we can use it to our advantage.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Will asks, his hackles rearing up again for reasons he can’t explain.

“Well, as we’ve already established, Nicholas Boyle’s murder fits hallmarks of the Ripper’s last kill.”

“Right, that’s the whole point,” he agrees, tone clipped. Already he doesn’t like where he thinks this is going.

“So what if we lean into that, giving Mr. Brown exactly what he wants?” she continues. “Say to the press that we think this was a Ripper display as well.”

“Are you trying to get someone else killed?” Will asks, and she has the grace to at least wince, but doesn’t walk back her argument. Will is astounded. He almost might have expected something like this of Crawford, but not of her.

“I think the idea has merit,” says Jack. Because of course he does. “But let’s take it one step further. We didn’t throw Freddie Lounds much of a bone last time when it was Abel Gideon taking credit for the Ripper’s work. Let’s call this slimy little bastard out by name and see what kind of response that gets us.”

“NO!” This sudden outburst earns many a shocked glance in Will’s direction before Crawford waves the onlooking agents off again. “Do you have any idea how *stupid* you both sound right now?” Will tempers his voice down all the way to a whisper, shaking where he stands furiously. A warm, familiar hand returns to his back to rub soothing circles again.

“I suppose I can understand the appeal of it,” says Hannibal. Will jerks back from his touch, stung, and looks up to try to get a read on the man he expected to be an ally in this, but Hannibal doesn’t meet his eyes. He seems neither entirely approving nor disapproving, however, instead attempting to straddle the line from a neutral perspective. “Though I agree with Will that it is a risky proposition, it could also be the one opportunity that exists to goad the Ripper into making a mistake.”

“The Ripper doesn’t make mistakes,” Will hisses, insulted. To his surprise, when Hannibal meets his eyes again now, they are sparkling with some hidden amusement.

“Everyone makes mistakes, Will,” he reminds him, hearkening back to their conversation at breakfast. “However, you’re right in that it is another long shot at best. Far more likely he’ll see this for the obvious trap that it is, but there is an obligation to try nonetheless.” Will blinks up at him and feels strangely relieved by these words.

“His pride won’t allow him to stand for anyone else taking credit for his work either way,” Jack insists. “He’ll lash out again. It’s not ideal, but Dr. Lecter’s right, it may be the only chance we get.”

“And with any luck, it’ll be Matthew Brown he lashes out at rather than another innocent,” adds Dr. Bloom. So *that’s* her angle, Will realizes, slightly awed and wondering why no one else seems surprised or even a bit ruffled by this peek at her own motives.

“I think we’re the ones who’ll be making a mistake if we try to force his hand. You’re rushing this,” Will pleads one final time, knowing it’ll be fruitless.

“I’ll set up a meeting with Ms. Lounds, see what kind of deal we can make to ensure she sticks to script,” Crawford says, already pulling out his phone and stepping away.

“I’m clearly not needed here anymore,” says Will. “Take me home?” he asks Hannibal, deliberately turning his back to Alana. He can feel her guilty expression drilling into the back of his head as they walk away together, but he refuses to turn around.

“Thanks for having my back in there,” he quips sarcastically as they slide back into the Bentley’s seats. In spite of himself, he still can’t seem to actually get *angry* with Hannibal about it, merely very confused. Hannibal looks over at him before turning the ignition and pulling out onto the road, that unreadable expression in his gaze once more.

“Perhaps it is the Ripper who should be thanking you for your earnest defense of him, Will.” Will takes in a steady breath and stares blankly at the dashboard. It’s safer, suddenly, somehow, than looking at the man beside him even if Hannibal’s eyes are on the road. “Their minds were made up when you recounted your story to them, perhaps even before that, when they saw Nicholas Boyle’s body. In that moment, the only voice they would listen to was the one which seemed to align with their own views.” He feels Hannibal glance to him once more as traffic slows them down, but doesn’t turn his head to look back. “This is what you wanted,” the alpha tells him gently, reminding him of their hushed conversation in the dark last night.

“Not like this,” Will refutes in the same soft tone. “It was one thing when it wasn’t tangled up with everybody else’s agendas too, but now it’s, it’s…” He swallows. “It’s mockery. An *insult.”*

“Truthfully?” Hannibal says with a hint of that curious playfulness Will recalls from their dinner when the alpha asked him not to tell Alana he was giving Will some of her beer, or this morning when he admitted that even he sometimes was capable of making *mistakes*. “I saw it more as a dare. Perhaps it is simply a matter of perspective.” Will thinks about that as they drive and doesn’t say anything more for the rest of the trip, silently mulling it over.

Will also has a choice to make as they pull up the drive at Port Haven, or rather more accurately, a choice he already decided upon when he woke up and now just has to follow through. He gives himself time to second-guess it as he unbuckles his seatbelt, but finds as he tries that there’s really nothing to think about even as other thoughts click into place. Apparently he’s already made up his own mind too.

He leans over the center console and brushes his lips over the corner of Hannibal’s mouth, just a quick, chaste peck and nothing more, already drawing away before the alpha has a chance to turn his head into it. He can’t look the other man in the eyes even as he tosses out a cheeky *“See ya!”* and slides out of the car, victory and embarrassment at war with each other inside his head, leaving him mostly just feeling flushed and giddy. He does glimpse enough to see that the man is both surprised and pleased as he watches Will walk away, and that tugs Will’s giddy smile even wider before he forcibly suppresses it, reasoning to himself that the nurses and receptionist probably shouldn’t see him looking so damned *happy* after just returning from a crime scene.

Which brings him to another puzzle he’s been ruminating on, the last piece of which just clicked home only minutes ago with little room for error or misunderstanding, the clues too numerous now to keep ignoring for fear he could be making a *mistake*. Will is in love with Hannibal Lecter.

The man who is almost certainly the Chesapeake Ripper.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, just Will being Will like always, the little shit ;D

They Sing for the Composer

Chapter Summary

> Will has an idea of what Hannibal Lecter is capable of now, but what does he plan on doing with that information?

Chapter Notes

> I seem to be developing a greater love for Goya, especially his sketches of late...really I probably could've just made the chapter titles *all* Goyas this whole time so there'd be at least some consistency to them. Oh well. xD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXIII. They Sing for the Composer

Abigail surprisingly doesn't give him much hell about sneaking out with Matthew last night. She listens quietly without interrupting while he relays everything he's been through between curfew and now, and in the end only gives him a bone-crushing hug that nonetheless conveys her feelings on the matter rather effectively.

"I swear if I see him again, I'll kill him," she whispers roughly while they're still practically cheek to cheek. Will huffs a quiet laugh, though he doesn't doubt her conviction one bit.

"Pretty sure everyone else is right in saying the Ripper will probably beat you to it first." He doesn't tell her any of his suspicions about who the Ripper is; for now at least, that's the sort of thing best kept between himself and Hannibal. She hums, a sound that could be thoughtfully accepting or irritable and discontent, but without seeing her face he doesn't know which it is. She already has her mind on something else when they part to look at each other again.

"You're really upset about not getting to Nick Boyle in time, aren't you?" Will's lips part wordlessly. He really hadn't thought…not even *Hannibal* had bothered to ask him about that. He swallows, glancing down and away from her. Abigail tilts her head curiously. "How come? He sure as hell wouldn't be mourning either of us if the positions were reversed."

"I'm not mourning him," Will says. "It was just…so unnecessary."

“I’m fairly certain he meant to attack us if he got one of us alone,” she points out dryly, but Will shakes his head.

“I don’t think so,” he says. “I think it’s easy to assume that because it’s the kind of thing one of *us* would do if the other had been found the way Cassie was, but…” He trails off and shrugs. “I don’t know. I didn’t see enough to say for sure, but that’s not the vibe I got. He was *angry,* that’s obvious, but not violent. I think he just wanted answers.”

“And when he didn’t get them, what then?” she asks skeptically. “He’d have just bid us good day and moved on with his life? Will, to be honest...” She shakes her head, reconsidering. “Never mind.”

“No, say it.” She looks to him and shifts her stance, almost bracingly.

“Maybe you’re right, maybe he wouldn’t have done anything, but I *can’t* honestly say I regret us never having to find out.”

Will could hardly blame her for that. “Did you really think I’d judge you for feeling that way?” he asks. She shrugs. “It’s not as if I’d have a leg to stand on even if I wanted to. Technically I did sort of stab a guy just on the presumption that he *might* do something I’d regret if I hadn’t.”

“He would have. You made the right call,” she states confidently. “Never doubt that.”

“I don’t,” he assures her.

“Good.” That appears to be the end of the matter. “So…” Abigail speaks up again after a minute. “How come Lecter dropped you off instead of Bloom?”

Will bites his lip. There are a few things about that he’d still like to keep to himself for the time being, including the fact that Alana had annoyed him with her plans of trapping the Ripper. He shrugs. “I guess she needed to stay to talk things out with Crawford, work out what they need Freddie to say to lay the best bait for the Ripper.” He realizes it’s probably true as he says it, since Alana hadn’t followed them back to the hospital in her own vehicle right away and is presumably still at the crime scene.

Abigail peers at him shrewdly, clearly able to tell that there’s something he’s leaving out but blessedly not calling him out on it, for now at least. There are few things he would ever lie to her about if pressed—really only one thing he can think of, his suspicions about Hannibal, and that only because it’s not his secret to share and he’s not as certain as he’d like to be about her reaction yet. He’ll need time to consider it carefully and weigh his options.

For almost the first time since they’ve met, it feels awkward to talk to her. The tension from their different approaches in dealing with the Matthew Brown issue has not simply disappeared, and now there are other things being left unsaid between them. He knows that no relationship is perfect, but he doesn’t want this to cause a rift between them. Just thinking about it feels like someone ripping a hole through his gut.

He's going to have to give something more here to allay some of that awkwardness they both feel, and there's only one way he can think of to do that. He sighs internally and allows himself to fidget outwardly a bit before he asks, "You, uh, you didn't happen to be looking out the window when Hannibal dropped me off by any chance, were you?"

"No," she says, dragging the word out as she narrows her eyes at him again. "Why? Did something happen outside while *Hannibal* was dropping you off?" she asks, unbearably smug as she makes note of the transition to first name basis. Great, she's going to be *insufferable* about this, he can already tell. Will ducks his head and stifles the grin that wants to form.

He deliberately mumbles the answer to his feet so that she gets to ask, her knowing smirk widening with this game, "I'm sorry, you did what now?"

Will huffs, and with just a touch of overdramatic reluctance for both of them to enjoy enunciates more clearly, "I said I kissed him."

Abigail doubles over cackling, and he honestly suspects she's not overacting half as much as he is. "I'm so fortunate to have a friend who's so supportive and understanding," he remarks dryly.

"I'm sorry," she says through more tearful giggles, clearly not sorry at all. "It's just…*you,* Mr. Strong Independent Omega Who Don't Need No Alpha." Will rolls his eyes. "Mr. I'll Drop Dead Before I Let That Guy Court Me, Mr. I'm Going to Beat Hannibal Lecter at His Own Game…"

"Hey now, I never said I was going back on that last one." Abigail raises her eyebrow at him and he raises one right back. "Just because we might end up somewhere more mutually beneficial than I was planning for doesn't mean I can't still make him work for it."

It's Abigail's turn to roll her eyes. "I bet even kissing him, you still managed to be as much of an asshole as always. If he wasn't prepared to live with that by now, he'd have given up already." She dodges his playfully indignant kick to her shin. "See? Just proving my point," she says, grinning.

The conversation continues along this vein, both of them reveling in the teasing and renewed sense of camaraderie. Will focuses on that feeling and tries not to think too deeply right now about the choices coming. In an ideal world, there won't be an either/or decision to be made. In that world, the best possible of worlds, he won't have to learn what the consequences would be of trying to put distance between himself and one of them in order to protect them both. In that world, he won't have to let go of some vital piece of himself for the sake of not losing the other.

He's tired of having to make such sacrifices. He hopes this, at last, is that ideal world.

*

"Do you have an appointment?"

“Do you have a beer?” Alana’s smirk is playful, but tired, the day’s strain already taking its toll though it is only nearing lunchtime. Hannibal allows her entry with a returned smile and steps away to fetch them both glasses from his cabinet. This morning’s events certainly call for a small break from regular social conventions which prohibit a little daytime indulgence, within reason and moderation.

“Have you been by the hospital at all since you left Jack?” he asks her as he pours the drinks.

“Not yet,” she admits. “I only just got away actually. I just have a few appointments this afternoon and no classes, so I figure I can afford a little self-medication between now and then.”

“Ah, and here I had wondered if it would be indelicate to ask whether this was a little fortification before another encounter with Will today or an avoidance of one.”

She winces at his incisiveness, accepting the beverage held out to her with a moderately chastened look. “I understand Will’s concerns. In fact, I share them, even if it was technically my idea.” She takes perhaps a slightly larger gulp from her beer than her regular sips meant to savor and appreciate. “Unfortunately, that doesn’t mean it was wrong to suggest it.”

“It is rarely so simple a matter as there being a right choice at odds with a wrong one, and often only with the gift of hindsight that we can see how our choices have shaped events while still only being able to guess at what results a different path might have yielded.”

“Would that they were so easy.”

Hannibal clicks his tongue lightly between his teeth. “I’m afraid I may have to disagree with you there. Sounds like a dreadfully dull way to live. And a maddeningly polite one.”

“Ha! You may be right,” she says. “Though it’s hard to imagine what would qualify to you as ‘maddeningly’ polite,” she adds, almost teasing.

“Even I have my limits, Alana,” he rejoins before sipping from his wine. “Social graces can only carry us so far.”

She muses on this thoughtfully for a moment whilst he muses on the decreasing likelihood that their easy, comfortable friendship will still be salvageable once she is made aware of the evolving nature of his relationship with Will. He will miss the relaxed spirit of these meetings, but their loss is but a stepping stone on the path to something far greater.

“There is something else which weighs on you,” he notes in the continued silence.

Alana sighs. “Not something else, but rather a consequence of *this* something I really should have seen coming. You think Will’s bothered about this mess now, you should be a fly on the wall when I have to tell him later what Jack agreed to in the negotiations with Freddie.”

“She wants to conduct the interview with him,” Hannibal surmises.

Alana nods with a bitter twist to her lips. “Maybe I did make the wrong suggestion. I wouldn’t have if I’d known. The nerve of her to make a demand like that when we’re already

practically gift-wrapping an approved sanction for more of her usual sensationalism!"

"She is nothing if not a clever opportunist. I am surprised, however, that Jack would acquiesce, given his disturbance at Will's disclosure of his earlier brush with danger."

"He thinks this is something we can control, direct the focus on so that it won't put Will any more in harm's way than the consultations have," she says, a clear note of contention in her voice since she and Jack, of course, still differ strongly about the level of danger the consultations alone present to the omega. "It's not that he *wants* to let Freddie have her way either, but he didn't fight it nearly as hard as I think he should have. The chance to possibly put two killers out of commission in one fell swoop, especially with one of them being the Ripper, outweighs everything else."

Hannibal does not ask her if she has considered the possibility that Jack's enthusiasm is not solely for the sake of his own personal crusade anymore, but also borne in part of his guilt for putting Will in such a position in the first place and a desire to see those risks he believes himself responsible for mitigated as swiftly as possible.

"You must allow Will final say in this," he tells her. "Do not put undue pressure on him to accept. If he does not assent to Ms. Lounds' terms, they must either be renegotiated or the current plan must be discarded entirely. That is the only way you will have even the possibility of him agreeing to it in any case."

"I know," she says. "And if, on the other hand, I push too hard for him to turn it down, he might do it just to be contrary." She snorts. "I've never known anyone else so stubborn, though sometimes I do wonder about Abigail. She's far more reserved to the point of *seeming* perfectly agreeable and quick to accede to others, but I can't help but notice how often that uncannily leads to her somehow getting her own way regardless." She sounds fond as she discusses Will's antagonism and Abigail's manipulative tendencies, and as rigorously self-aware and self-questioning as he has always known Alana Bloom to be, she cannot be oblivious to this herself.

For this reason, he knows he will not be dismissed out of hand when he points out, "Your own reasons for suggesting this course of action in regards to Matthew Brown, if not in regards to the Ripper as well, are not entirely professionally motivated either."

Alana takes another overlarge gulp of her beer. "My professional neutrality is…something I find myself feeling less and less acquainted with every day, in regards to Will and Abigail in particular," she admits slowly. "I can't say specifically when it drifted beyond my reach. It happened gradually."

"While you were worrying over the potential consequences of their influence on one another, you neglected to anticipate your own attachment until it was already an established and recognizable part of your identity."

"I can't be the only one who feels that…attachment, can I?"

Hannibal smiles at her gently. "You are not," he confesses freely. It is not the same, not even remotely, but he will not disabuse whatever suppositions she might make of that statement

today. A brief look crosses her face which he recognizes, the topic of attachment undoubtedly bringing to mind their evening at the orchestra together.

Once, he might have entertained the possibility of allowing their relations to follow the predictable but potentially useful route of a more intimate liaison, but that was before Will. After Will, there can be no substitute.

“We should all have dinner again soon,” he says. “Perhaps even inviting Jack as well, to show him a reminder of what his fight is truly for,” he adds, mainly to temper her expectations since he does not really believe Jack needs the reminder, although it would certainly make for an interesting evening. She seems mildly disappointed and discomfited at the inclusion of Crawford, but genuine nonetheless as she voices her agreement and stands.

As he ushers her out, he wonders what Will’s response will be and what effect it could have on the ideal scenario concerning Mr. Brown they’ve already discussed. It will likely be telling, whichever move he decides upon now that their secrets are all but out in the open for each other to see.

That is the danger of engaging with another mind as razor-sharp as Will Graham’s, that he can make a dozen puns about cannibalism right under the noses of the likes of Jack Crawford and Alana Bloom and leave them none the wiser, yet with only one particularly pointed comment in the car this morning he might as well have plainly declared the truth of his multi-faceted identity to the one person who could ruin him if he so chose. There can be no going back now, and there is both a thrilling sweetness and a terror of uncertainty to that vulnerability.

All that’s left to do now is wait.

*

“If she strays off topic to my personal history or to Abigail’s, it’s over,” he’d told them unequivocally when they came to him with Lounds’ terms. “Other than that, I’ll answer any questions about the case y’all want me to, but I am *not* going to corroborate that bullshit about Matthew Brown being the Ripper.” As easy and perhaps even warranted as it would have been to continue giving them both a hard time, Will had to admit it had quickly gotten rather old even for him, and a useless waste of energy as well since he was, after all, agreeing to do it. Readily even, to both Bloom and Crawford’s surprise, though his capitulation came with those conditions.

“Nor would it be fair or reasonable of any of us to expect you to,” Jack had assured him. “I’m going to be doing all the talking on that particular front separately, so don’t even worry about it. In fact, it’s best if you don’t say anything on the subject at all.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny these claims…” Will dryly began to rehearse.

“No,” Jack had firmly interrupted, a worried tightening around his mouth and eyes. “No cheeky commentary either, even that could be construed in a way that’s…just don’t even answer if she tries to bring it up. Leave that part to me, Will, alright?” he’d finished gently. Confused and uncomfortable with the shift in tone, Will could only nod in response. He

hadn't even made the sarcastic quip that had been on the tip of his tongue about Jack's continuous merry jaunt down the path to career suicide, the remark suddenly falling flat and curiously inappropriate to his mind.

Will fidgets a bit now with the hem of his sleeve, trying not to literally tap his foot in impatience like an annoying ass as Jack and Alana talk to Lounds first. He has his own reasons for going along with this and is eager to get on with it.

"So," Lounds says as she slides into the chair across from him as soon as Bloom and Crawford are done, "guess that boy toy I saw you with the other week wasn't so shy and innocent after all. Sure know how to pick 'em, don't you, Graham?" She smiles sunnily and Will returns it, just because. She's going to have to try a lot harder than that to rattle him.

"I assure you, Matthew Brown is about as far from my type as it gets, Freddie." The reporter looks at him in mild disbelief.

"What *is* your type then?" Somewhere behind them, Alana coughs discreetly. Lounds waves her off. "Just chitchatting a little, Dr. Bloom. Alright, let's get started then, shall we?" she says. "Care to weigh in on Brown's apparent connection to the Ripper?"

"Will's going to decline to comment on that," Jack answers for him as promised. Freddie frowns up at the man over Will's shoulder.

"Doesn't that kind of defeat the purpose here?"

"Well, if you're saying we don't need him for this interview after all, Miss Lounds…" Freddie smirks thinly at Jack's dry tone.

"Cute. I get it now. Not to worry, Agent Crawford, I can think of plenty of other questions to ask."

"Just so long as you stick to the topic of Mr. Brown, *without* any leading remarks that link him back to the Ripper." Will feels Jack's smug satisfaction take up residence in the form of a smirk on his own face while Freddie darts her eyes between them both, looking less amused by the second.

"Guess we're keeping this short then," she gives in finally. "It's a start anyway." Hope really does spring eternal if Freddie's hedging her bets now that she can somehow make this into only the first of many interviews with the omega. "The Boyles have now lost both of their children, seemingly as part of the same goal to get your attention," she points out, perhaps more sharply than she would have out of spite for being outmaneuvered, and deftly phrases it in a manner which doesn't specify whether she believes there is more than one murderer responsible or not. "Can you at least comment on that?" she asks silkily.

"Only to say that I'm sorry for their loss." Will clasps his hands in front of him and looks down and away in obvious discomfort. He clears his throat. "And to point out that there are other, far pleasanter ways to communicate, or so Dr. Lecter's always telling me," he adds with an awkward smile, trying to inject some levity to brush past the tension in the room.

“And who’s Dr. Lecter? Would this be your other psychiatrist I’ve heard about?” Freddie asks, predictably latching onto any scrap of personal detail she can weasel out of him. “I haven’t had the pleasure of an introduction yet. You must be feeling *so* solid and stable though, with two separate shrinks keeping an eye on your sanity for you.”

“Dr. Lecter is *not* my psychiatrist,” Will responds through gritted teeth. As soon as the words are out of his mouth, he spots a dangerous, cunning gleam in Freddie’s expression. “Not officially, I mean. We’re just having conversations.” This only makes the sudden, sharpened assessment in her gaze worsen.

“This is your first and only warning to return to the topic at hand, Freddie,” Alana reminds the other woman pleasantly before she can continue down this particular line of inquiry.

“Of course,” Freddie demurs, but Will isn’t fool enough to think she’ll be letting go of it so easily. “Speaking of communication, as you say, it only works if it’s not one-sided. What would you say to this killer if he were in front of you now, to redress the balance?”

“I’d tell Matthew if he thought it would impress me to attack some alpha I don’t even know, he was mistaken. What he did was cowardly. If he really wanted to prove his worth, he’d do the right thing, the smart thing—come out of hiding right now and submit himself to the proper authority.” Will looks to Jack to make sure he’s not overstepping his bounds by saying as much. The other man nods and gives him a thumbs up. He and Alana mostly seem relieved by how relatively well the short interview has gone, with only the minimal expected amount of rude cattiness on Will’s part.

“An appeal to his conscience, really?” Freddie asks since there’s no moratorium on her own snide attitude, certainly none that can be reliably enforced.

Will shrugs. “If some small part of him actually cares or has ever understood me at all, maybe he’ll listen.” Freddie looks unimpressed. For the rest of the interview, Will is disappointingly monosyllabic and bland with his answers just to further annoy her. She already got all the good quotes she wanted and more, after all. Why give her anything else?

Neither Jack nor Alana seem too bothered by how the rest of the interview goes themselves, only grateful and apologetic when he sees it through to the end despite clearly burning out early on. Will lets them think that’s the reason and hunches forward tiredly in his seat once Freddie leaves, almost half-expecting one or both of them to pat him on the head and offer to take him out for ice cream now for good behavior. Neither of them does.

It’s only when he sees the article for himself in the morning that he’s certain of his success and can finally relish in the feeling of a job well done, smiling secretly on the inside while appearing only exasperated and disgusted on the outside, and even that act still paling in comparison to the outrage Alana must feel as she spends most of the breakfast hour needlessly apologizing to him, apologizing to Hannibal over the phone, and arguing over the phone with Jack over the possible merits of suing Lounds for libel even if neither injured party seems interested in going that route themselves and in spite of the fact that Lounds had technically fulfilled at least the letter if not the spirit of her end of the bargain.

“I mean, is she really even a crime blog anymore or just a gossip rag at this point?” Alana clicks her teeth in irritation at whatever the alpha responds to that with on the other end of the line.

> *Whether it’s as the object of prurient obsession for the now deceased Tooth Fairy or as sudden new fixation and muse of the alleged Chesapeake Ripper, it seems our Will Graham can’t catch a break these days, but has he finally had enough of the unwanted advances of killers? When asked for comment on the murders of siblings Nicolas and Cassandra Boyle, alleged by the director of the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI Jack Crawford (recently disgraced for his controversial decision to bring Graham onto his team in an unofficial capacity thanks to the young omega’s unparalleled “expertise” in understanding the criminal mind, having been rather intimately acquainted with one for years until Dolarhyde’s demise) to have been carried out by one Matthew Brown, a beta orderly at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane and former paramour of the surprisingly popular omega, Graham had this to say…*

Lounds had actually quoted Will’s message to Brown verbatim, to his pleasant surprise. He hadn’t dared hope for more than a paraphrase that *might* hold up its meaning between the lines mostly intact so long as she didn’t take too much license with her interpretation. There would be no hindrance in that case to what Will expects to come of this article if the beta is at least half as clever as he thinks he is…or at least half as jealous and compulsive as Will *knows* he is.

> *It’s hard to know at times where Graham stands himself on the thin line between depravity and innocence—which comes as no surprise given his sordid history—but it seems he’s found a new source of stability (or at least a well-maintained imitation of it) in the capable hands of esteemed Baltimore psychiatrist Hannibal Lecter. Oh, officially, he’s under the designated care of one of the FBI’s standard court-appointed therapists… unofficially, however, one does have to wonder just what is going on behind the closed doors of Lecter’s private office in that case. Sources say that Graham can be seen coming and going from Lecter’s building at least twice weekly, attending regular meet-ups with the unattached alpha bachelor without any form of oversight or supervision from Graham’s attending psychologist or legal custodians. Maybe some insight into this unanswered question could explain Graham’s apparent lacking interest in other, less orthodox but certainly more familiar potential suitors.*
>
> *Or perhaps the FBI is simply headhunting now to find practitioners willing to experiment on their less-than-stable omegan consultants with rather outdated modes of “treatment” for the now defunct diagnosis of hysteria. Without any official statement from the involved parties, who can really say?*

Will has to avoid Abigail too now for as long as he can. She knows him and his expressions far too well and might ask otherwise why he's been slowly killing himself all morning via laughter suppression.

It had been tricky, as he'd known it would be, having to rely on his understanding of Freddie to figure out which "accidental" tells and scraps of information would hook her attention like a fox scenting a hare's trail and using them to his advantage without overdoing it, giving her just enough to draw her own conclusions about certain things while also adequately relaying the message he wanted to give before clamming up like someone who really didn't want to be there longer than he had to be…which was true, of course. He still hates Freddie, even if she's proven herself borderline useful just this once by writing exactly the sort of garbage he'd expected of her, and had, in fact, actually counted on her doing this time around.

Now to wait and see who else he's been successful in maneuvering and predicting…and how well a certain *unorthodox suitor* will rise to meet his rather demanding expectations.

Chapter End Notes

Merry early Christmas and a happy new year, y'all ;)

The Sacrifice to Priapus

Chapter Summary

Will's scheming comes to a head.

Chapter Notes

The Sacrifice to Priapus by Goya. And for no reason at all here's a piano cover of Rihanna's Umbrella. Yep. Totally no reason at all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXIV. The Sacrifice to Priapus

"I can't believe no one insisted on leaving an honor guard for us outside in your waiting room," Will says as soon as the office door shuts behind him, unceremoniously flinging himself into 'his' chair, limbs just slightly akimbo, to smirk up at the alpha smiling wryly in return, still standing near the door with his hands in his trouser pockets.

"It was suggested, but I was equally insistent that it would do more harm than good for my practice were you to be 'chaperoned' during our sessions, as it might appear to lend an air of validity to Ms. Lounds' claims. I appreciate that you felt similarly enough to also turn it down when offered," Hannibal says as if they are not both perfectly aware just who planted the seed for those claims in the first place.

Will shrugs one shoulder and handwaves in a magnanimous *'think nothing of it'* gesture. "I told Jack with how far off the rails Freddie went in her article that was obviously supposed to be about the Ripper, their resources would be better spent on a protection detail for *her,"* he says, his tone and expression a perfect facsimile of benign thoughtfulness and innocence. He's rewarded with a narrowing of the psychiatrist's eyes that crinkles in the corners just the way he likes, the way that means he's just as amused as Will is. It's fun imagining Freddie's reaction to having a team of agents show up at her door, assigned to the task of tailing her wherever she goes. "Plus, leaving me unguarded would look like such an obvious trap, there's no way anyone would fall for it. And the Ripper would have to want me dead in the first place, which at the moment he has no reason to."

Neither of them give anything away in their expressions, but Will *knows* Hannibal has to have considered it—the possibility that this *is* a trap set for him, a way to goad him into

incriminating himself, their flirtatious game a slow buildup to betrayal and capture. Maybe in another life, one with a Will less settled and at peace with who he is and what he wants, it would be exactly that.

This Will Graham has chosen his monster, has already sunk his own claws in deep with no intention of letting go, and is now making a game only of waiting to see how long it takes his monster to figure that out and make his move.

Hannibal stands beside his own chair but has made no move to sit yet, merely resting his hand on the back of it, and it's the only tell he's given so far that he anticipates *something interesting* coming out of this particular session. Any other alpha or beta with a dominating streak would be pacing agitatedly around the room and likely pumping the shifting air around them full of territorial hormones in the process. "A sniper on a rooftop could still be installed somewhere nearby, and there is the nature of Matthew Brown's obsession to consider," he points out.

Will shakes his head. "No good line of sight into this room from any of the other buildings around." And at the same time, nowhere anyone with a shorter range weapon like a pistol could stand close enough to take the shot without being seen first. Frank may not have spoken much about his time in the armed services, but for all that he never planned on letting Will out of the house long enough to put his knowledge to good use, he at least taught the omega enough about how to be mindful of his surroundings and spot vantage points, *just in case.* He wonders if Hannibal chose the location of his office with this idea in mind or simply with the thought of avoiding disruptions to his own privacy and that of his patients.

Will doesn't bother to tack on that with how much the ice has thinned beneath Jack's feet at work, the man can't afford to make too many waves at this point and probably wouldn't be able to justify to his superiors the expense of deploying active snipers just to follow him or Hannibal around as a precaution anyway. He just repeats, loudly, what he'd said to Crawford when the alpha voiced his displeasure at Will's refusal of *any* kind of protection. "And Matthew Brown's just another coward hiding behind a gun. A beta struggling with inadequacy issues and an alpha complex a mile wide. No skill, no elegance or finesse, and no imagination." *He still has a gun,* Jack had responded, to which Will had merely fired back, *So did Eldon Stammets.*

"Aw, come on, babe, give a *little* credit where it's due." Hannibal gives no immediate reaction to the voice behind him, only catching Will's eye before he turns around, towards the patient's exit their guest must have silently come in through, something sparking in the alpha's own gaze in that brief moment he and Will share that causes the unapologetic smile Will gives him to widen.

"He's decent enough at sneaking around and going virtually unnoticed when he wants to, I suppose," Will allows graciously.

"Thank you."

"Probably a talent picked up from a lifetime of always being invisible and too unremarkable to remember," Will finishes. Brown's face twitches, pulling at the ugly utilitarian stitching in

his cheek. He is indeed holding a gun to the alpha's chest from a few feet away, likely the same pistol he killed Nick Boyle with.

"He neg you like this all the time too?" the beta asks Lecter, the coy smirk he puts to his words lopsided since one half of his mouth can't form the correct movements.

"I have found Will to be quite skilled in the art of saying exactly what he wants in precisely the way he means to," Hannibal answers truthfully, turning partly to look back towards Will where he stands so as not to give the impression of speaking over him without including him in the conversation. Matthew's eyes flicker back momentarily to the omega as well, seemingly unable to help himself, and Will returns the unwanted gaze unflinchingly.

In a moment almost too quick to see from the corner of his eye, a hand comes down on top of the gun and pushes it downward. It fires once, embedding a bullet harmlessly into the wooden floor as Hannibal's body has already twisted too far to the side to be in the path of its trajectory, while his right fist swings out and lands an awkward side-punch to Matthew's neck.

Oh. *Not a punch,* Will realizes a moment later, the glint of a small needle visible when Hannibal pulls his hand back. Brown crumples unceremoniously to the floor, his face barely registering an instant of shock and panic before it goes entirely lax and unseeing.

"Well." This…is not quite the fight Will was expecting. "That was anticlimactic."

Hannibal, currently kneeling at Matthew's side to check his pulse, turns his head and gives him a look through hooded eyes and bangs that have fallen from their normally perfect side-sweep into his face. "Apologies if I've left you disappointed, tesoro." Will's throat clicks as he swallows back the undignified noise that wants to slip out and his thighs squeeze more tightly shut, as if that could possibly be less obvious of a tell to the observant doctor than crossing his legs would be.

"I'll only be disappointed if he's already dead." Will focuses on reminding himself of the other man's continued presence in the room to force himself to calm down and not become distracted by how much he suddenly wants to get up and run his hands through that hair, tugging and pulling to find out how much messier he can make it. Or question what it means that the alpha's clinical efficiency in handling the situation is apparently far more attractive to him than a showier display of physical prowess in a quote-unquote "real" dominance fight could ever have been.

A flicker of dark hunger, there and gone in a second but enough to make it clear the alpha has *definitely* picked up on the current slant of Will's thoughts, before he mercifully looks away and answers Will's indirect question. "He will be unconscious for a few hours, long enough to be transported and better constrained to suit a long-term arrangement."

"What's the longest you've kept a victim alive for?" Will asks breathlessly.

"I don't keep victims, Will."

“No, they’re not victims,” Will corrects himself. “There are only people and *pigs.”* He pauses, expression blanking while he goes inside himself momentarily, another piece clicking into place. “You eat them.”

Another second to reflect on this fact and everything that it means, then, “Abby knows. *Shit,* Abby *knows?”* He sits up straighter, mouth gaping open unattractively before shutting once again.

He recovers himself enough to throw a sullen glare at the alpha quietly observing every reaction on Will’s face as though he has all the time in the world to let the younger man process this revelation. “You guys *suck.”*

Hannibal smiles—the smallest thrum of tension that had begun to build in his shoulders now eased, knowing the moment of potential crisis has passed—and bends down again to the practical task of physically restraining the unconscious beta before lifting and transporting him to the trunk of his car. By the time he returns to his office, Will has gotten up and pushed the doctor’s rolling chair far out of the way and started removing decorative curios and drawers to make the desk easier to move as well.

“The board will need to be replaced,” Hannibal notes, eyeing the unsightly hole in his floor.

“Yeah, well, unless you’re planning on calling a contractor out here tonight…” Will drawls, bracing his hands under the edge of the desk and tossing a significant glance to its opposite end. Hannibal takes his own place at that end and together they move the desk off the large area rug underneath, then pull the rug forward a couple of inches to cover the bullet hole before returning the rest of the furniture to their original positions. No one who doesn’t know what happened here should be able to tell the difference.

Will leans back against the front of the desk, lightly seating himself on its edge, and Hannibal joins him, their thighs just a few inches apart. Not quite close enough to touch, but close enough that they easily could. Will rolls his neck in a seemingly lazy, catlike fashion and looks up at the older man, asking, “So, what now?”

“I can drive you back early and cite an unexpected emergency with a patient if you wish, or we could finish out the hour before you’re expected to return. The sedative should hold for more than long enough.” Will doesn’t take offense to these suggestions, recognizing them for what they really are—an out. If he chooses to stay, now, anything that happens beyond this point skirts the line past observation into participation. Though one could argue they’re already well past that now.

Instead, he asks, “What does the Chesapeake Ripper do with extended houseguests before they go on the butcher’s block? By which I mean, tell me you don’t actually keep *evidence* at your *house.”*

The other man’s eyes crinkle with his smile.

*

“Sure thing, Dr. Lecter,” says the overnight attending nurse, scribbling the requested addendum onto the patient check-in log. “Will that be all? Yeah, no problem. Uh-huh. You have a good night too, sir.” She hangs up, and the trainee shadowing her this evening speaks up uncertainly.

“Um, aren’t we technically supposed to ask Dr. Bloom before approving something like this?”

Probably, Abigail thinks from her hiding spot, which is really just a nefarious way of saying ‘bit of wall in the nearest connecting hallway’ she’s casually leaned up against, just out of view.

“Nah, there’s no reason to bother her after-hours. Lecter’s practically an attending psych by all rights, even though I think he only sees one or two of the patients here.”

“It’s just…it’s kind of a weird request. Keeping a resident out overnight. Isn’t it?”

Excellent deduction there, Sherlock. Abigail wonders what Will and Lecter might be up to, and whether or not it might be linked to that slimy beta asshole once again, but she’s not too worried anymore if it is. Will’s more than proven now that he can handle that creep, and she’s certain that Hannibal is more than a match for him too. It just sucks that she doesn’t get to be there as well.

There’s a weighty silence, which Abigail guesses would be the senior nurse glancing around to ensure they’re alone before she drops her voice conspiratorially to answer, “Could be, but I don’t know. From what I’ve been told, this isn’t even the first time, just the first we’ve been informed about it. Been a lot of other weird shit going on behind the scenes lately too, like *freaking head-of-the-FBI* also coming to talk to this Graham guy level of bat-shit weird. Could even be this is just a cover for more government stuff, who knows.”

“This isn’t my first hazing on the job, you know,” says the other woman with a wry smile in her voice. “I can tell you’re making this up, trying to convince the new girl that one mental patient who thinks he’s an undercover secret agent *totally* actually is one.”

The first woman laughs loudly. “Jesus, I didn’t even think about how it sounds when you say it out loud. I’m honestly not making it up, but I guess I can’t blame you for not believing me yet.” She clicks the pen closed decisively against the clipboard before setting both back on the front desk. “Alright, come on, it’s about time for some of the patients to take evening meds.”

Abigail slinks back to her own room, already gone before their footsteps round the corner.

*

He examines the cuts of meat with a critical but appreciative eye. Already, it is unrecognizable which parts of which animal they came from. Will would have no idea he is looking at something unlikely to be found in a typical deli display had he not been present for every step of the surgery and subsequent butchery. Really, his only critique had been the use

of anesthetic during the former, but he perfectly understood the alpha's reasoning. Fear brought about by pain or an early return to consciousness would only sour the flavor.

It had been gratifying enough to watch Matthew's eyes blink open post-op, unseeing in the almost blinding light of the fluorescents above, and witness their disoriented, groggy horror slowly mount higher before Will placed the breathing mask back over the beta's face to put him under again. The man couldn't have comprehended anything beyond the bright white of the room and his own unfeeling paralysis in those brief seconds, but that's more than alright with Will. Let him wake up again later to the pain, an agonizing reminder of his continued existence with more horrors yet to come, and only realize then that there are pieces missing, alone in a darkened, silent room like some forgotten thing in a dusty old attic with no clue when or even if one of his captors will return to check on the IV drip connected to his arm. Maybe he'll try to yank it out in an attempt to kill himself before someone shows up, the last bit of agency left to him, although Will doubts it.

He puts the freshly labeled and vacuum-sealed packages away in the large freezer inside the hidden kill room of Hannibal's safehouse…or rather, *one* of them. Because *of course* he has more than one, the absurdly rich prick. This is only one out of what he bets is an improbably high number of such houses, especially since for most killers even *two* would already be improbably high enough. Trust the Ripper to be goddamned extra enough to have, well, *extra* compared to everyone else.

To be honest, Will can't claim he's not a bit impressed by the sheer number of precautions and failsafes the man has in place, of which Will is now privy to only a *fraction* of, all for the sake of either avoiding being caught or having somewhere to fall back to and regroup if the worst does happen. Murder as an art form must be a rather expensive hobby, the kind which shouldn't be cheaped out on if one wants to maintain the freedom required to keep on doing it.

More importantly, Will can't pretend his being here now hasn't fundamentally shifted their relationship again. Separation without bloodshed is entirely impossible now, if it ever was possible to begin with. If he needs proof still that the alpha is serious about wanting to share *everything* with him, then this is it. And as for Will? He's a greedy, selfish little thing who's learned to stop fighting against his greedy, selfish urges. *Everything* is exactly what he intends to have.

While he waits for Hannibal to finish setting up his unconscious "guest" in his own heavily secured and soundproofed room, Will returns to the living room and seats himself at the gorgeous piano set in front of tall, wide windows, their blinds left open to what must be a spectacular view of the cliffs in daylight hours. He tries a few keys, making sure it's in tune, and starts playing randomly from memory, playful refrains from some of his favorite pieces, snatches of half-forgotten pop songs he learned to mimic by ear, whatever catches his fancy in the moment with no real thought to coherence. With luck, it might annoy the alpha into hurrying up so he can come out and stop Will from continuing.

"I did not know you could play." Will misses a note, but at least he doesn't jump right out of his skin. He ceases to play and glares up at the sneaky, silent alpha, who manages somehow to look both contrite and amused. He is neither annoyed nor driven to tears of rapturous joy,

however. Will wonders which of the two would be easier for him to elicit, deciding then he needs to do research and practice more for the sake of future testing later. For now, he scoots to make room on the bench and raises an eyebrow in challenge. The other man complies, just as Will knew he would.

What he expects is a highly technical and complicated piece from some obscure opera that just happens to be both poignant and somehow thematically relevant to the heart of their entire courtship. What he gets is the rest of that fucking Rihanna song he just left off in the middle of. By the time he realizes what's happening, Will is curled in on himself with his head in his hands, crying in silent laughter.

"I have always harbored a secret hope that I would one day play a piece which would move you to tears," Hannibal says when he's finished, uncannily echoing one of Will's earlier thoughts. "I did not think it would happen on the first try."

"You son of a bitch," Will half-whispers, swiping the treacherous stray drops of moisture from the corners of his eyes, breathless and red-faced from keeping himself quiet so he wouldn't interrupt Hannibal's playing. "When did you even hear that song before today?"

"Contrary to popular opinion, I do, in fact, live and move within the same society as everyone else and thus receive the same exposure to any modern hits played over the loudspeakers in most marketplaces and other businesses."

"Please. I refuse to believe you shop anywhere that doesn't hire live violinists for the sole purpose of stalking their customers throughout the entire store." Their thighs and shoulders brush as they talk, gone the careful gap of distance that was still present just a few hours before.

"Did you choose which cut you'd like to try for dinner?" Will nods, but when he feels the leg beside his shift as if Hannibal is about to stand, he stops it with a hand gently laid just above the knee.

"It's in the fridge." His fingers spread, just a little, and curl a bit. "It'll keep." If Will gets his way tonight, it'll keep for a *while.*

The other man watches him steadily, waiting for Will to make the first move. Someday Will wants to see him get impatient enough to just *take,* but for today he revels in the power he holds to dictate all the shots. He slides his hand upward and inward to graze the man's thigh under the guise of pulling him in closer, lifting his other hand to cup the alpha's cheek and draw his face closer to his own as well. For a minute he just nuzzles and scents the alpha there, brushing the corners of his mouth and the tip of his nose along sharp cheekbones and the underside of a jaw that is just starting to grow in its five o'clock shadow.

Only when his throat catches on the faintest first stirrings of a purr, and an equally faint, answering rumble vibrates against fingers which have slid down the alpha's neck, does he lean up for their first real kiss, one he doesn't snatch himself away from at the last second this time just to deny the other man the opportunity to kiss back. The only sounds in the room are their breathing and the intimate wet slide of lips and tongues tentatively probing for a taste of one another.

A hand reaches up and tenderly cradles Will's elbow. The other one presses lightly against the small of his back, closing the tiny gap left between them even further. Without breaking away from the kiss, Will sits up higher and twists around bodily, and Hannibal immediately reads his intent, moving to the middle of the bench so the omega can straddle him. Tender touches deepen into grasping, hungrier ones. Will wraps his arms around Hannibal's shoulders and clings to him there, groaning into the other man's mouth at the hard press of their clothed bodies against each other.

He rolls his hips, the movement causing both of them to shudder and tighten their grips. It would be easy to get lost in this, just rubbing himself against the alpha beneath him like an animal until he's too hard and wet to think straight and the other man is similarly affected, let nature run its course.

He indulges the idea for another moment, lifts and lowers and *grinds* until one of them growls. Then lifts himself again, but this time it's to stand and back himself against the piano, reaching behind to close the lid over the keys before pulling himself up to sit on top of it. If the other man has a problem with Will's abuse of his furniture, he doesn't mention it. He makes to stand as well, but Will stops him again, this time with a foot lightly pressing on his thigh instead of his hand. He's probably leaving a dusty print on the man's trousers, but he doesn't care. The fact that Hannibal lets him do it anyway is arousing enough to make him close his eyes against another heady rush of power and want, throat clicking as he swallows.

"You'll really let me have whatever I want, no matter what I ask for, won't you?" Will can hardly recognize his own voice.

"You know the answer to that. You needn't ask, unless you're angling for something specific. Then you'll have to tell me what it is." Will hums in response, drawing his foot in a lazy, swirling pattern over the man's leg. Only when he drags it inward to lightly rest against the alpha's crotch, a devious glint in his eye, does he reach the end of Hannibal's indulgence. Fingers softly encircle his ankle then, the gesture matching his own in gentleness and implied threat. "There is a line between teasing and being cruel, darling."

"You enjoy my cruelty," Will fires back. He can feel his own grin, how fierce and wild it must be, unsettling even for him. The look Hannibal gives him matches that too. "What if what I want is to throw a monkey wrench in all your best laid plans?"

"I would not be surprised to find you once again indulging in your favorite pastime." Will wants to at least pretend to be offended, but his face won't cooperate with the narrow-eyed expression he tries to make, still smiling but less crazed looking now.

"I see through you, doctor. I know exactly what your expectations for this evening were," Will tells him, mocking but not mean. "Murder talk over dinner followed by a night of passion and promises before you bring me back to my caretakers with a perfectly prepared, respectable excuse for why you kept me out so late, sterling reputation still intact."

"You make it sound almost dull, and more than a little sordid." Will bats his eyelashes innocently at the alpha, as if to ask, *'Who, me?'*

“Well, really, what kind of omega do you take me for, doctor?” he asks, pulling his foot from the man’s lap to sit up straighter, playing up the act. “The kind who’ll just put out and take you at your word that you’ll make an honest omega of me someday?”

Hannibal smiles up at him, shrewdness and curiosity lying behind the expression. “Are you asking me to make an honest omega of you now, Will Graham?”

Will blinks, slow and pleased. “I have certain strict, *exacting* boundaries, Doctor Lecter, but lucky for you they’re as easily defined as the pot in a high stakes poker game. *All or nothing.* So which will it be?” He tilts his head, deliberately exposing the unblemished side of his throat. “How badly do you want to sink your teeth into me tonight, Hannibal?”

The alpha’s eyes darken, and because Will is looking so closely, he can see the almost imperceptible tightening of the man’s jaw. The omega smirks, victorious. “Our pace has always been dictated by you, Will. I am content with continuing to take things slowly, if you are.”

Will gazes steadily back at him, fingers drumming once in concert against the lacquered wooden piano under him. “I’m not.”

He doesn’t try to stop Hannibal getting up from the bench this time, peering up with a satisfied smile at the alpha crowding closer as if to hem him in. “Then we mustn’t waste any time,” the man says, lifting Will’s left hand with his right to lay a kiss on the back of it. Will flushes, unaccountably embarrassed by the sweet romance behind the gesture. “It’s already past dark.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“You did say all or nothing, Will.” The alpha gently thumbs one of Will’s knuckles, the one on his ring finger, still holding the omega’s hand with reverence. “There are more ways to lay a claim than just a bite.”

Will sucks in a breath, suddenly dizzied by the realization that even though he’s the one who’s been calling the shots this evening that got them to this point, Hannibal is so adaptable to Will’s crazy demands that he’s *still* capable of surprising the omega and turning his own expectations around on him. “You’re serious?” he nonetheless has to ask. “You really want to do this? Tonight?”

“Do you?” Hannibal asks him, quite serious. Will genuinely thinks about it for a minute, but soon realizes that in the wake of every other decision he’s made up to and including this moment, he really doesn’t have to.

“Yeah.” He laughs, flushed and giddy, in full knowledge of everything he’s agreeing to. “Yes. Fuck it, why not tonight? Let’s go.”

Hannibal helps him down from the piano, and together they rush back to the car, turning the psychiatrist’s phone back on once they’re a good distance away from the safehouse. They’ll need it to make all their essential last-minute arrangements, and to find the right sort of venue that can still take walk-ins at this hour.

Chapter End Notes

puts hand over mouth Captain Kirk style, pretends to be shocked like I haven't been planning this for literal years :D ;D

The Starry Night

Chapter Summary

They elope.

Chapter Notes

And there is much rejoicing, for the Great and Terrible Beast Known as Writer's Block hath finally been slain!

A classic Van Gogh everyone should know, because apparently I'm feeling like a romantic sap.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XXV. The Starry Night

Beverly stifles a yawn as she presses the button for the elevator, following it up with another sip from her coffee while she waits for the soft *ding* that sounds right before the automatic doors slide open. She's here a little early, as Jack has asked her and the others to be for as long as there are still follow-up reports and processing to be done from the latest crime scene. It kind of bites, but she gets it. They all do. He hasn't said anything, but they all know this is the big one for Jack. The higher-ups are pushing him out and with the Ripper already a third of the way through his cycle, the window of opportunity is closing in, the last one Jack Crawford's ever going to get. The last one *anyone's* probably going to get for a long time, and she doubts whichever chump they pick to replace the Guru is going to have more luck with this case. There have been whispers around the department that the next team lead might be *Krendler,* for fuck's sake. If it's true, she's filing for a goddamn transfer as soon as the first slice of cake at Jack's retirement party gets cut. No way is she working under that misogynistic prick.

She swings by Jack's office first, since Jimmy and Brian probably haven't zombie-shuffled their way out of the breakroom down to the labs just yet anyway. She's not too alert yet herself, since her hand's already raised up to knock before she sees through the glass door that Jack already has someone in there. She almost leaves, but Crawford's eyes catch hers before she can turn to go, and there's open concern in them. He waves her in.

“Has there been another body?” she asks as she comes in, much more awake now. Remembers a second too late to give Alana Bloom an acknowledging nod in greeting, but the other woman seems far too preoccupied herself to notice her accidental rudeness.

“Not that we know of. Bev, I need you to round up the others and get ready. I’m about to put out an APB.” She’s about to ask for details, but Bloom answers her question before she can raise it.

“Will and Hannibal have been missing for over twelve hours. He apparently called to update the log for Will’s check-in time, which is very unlike him, but his phone is shut off now and no one has actually seen them since yesterday evening.”

“Oh shit,” Beverly says with a quick laugh, the tension that’s been bunching up in her spine since she saw them through the door rapidly bleeding out into breathless relief. “You really had me going for a sec. Yeah, no, they’re fine. They’re impulsive dumbasses who should probably turn their damn phone back on, but I’m sure they just wanted to sleep in, that’s all. They weren’t dead in a ditch last I saw them at least.”

“You saw them last night, Katz? When?” Jack returns his desk phone to its cradle without dialing a number, the tension melting away from his and Bloom’s features too at the confirmation that their colleagues are almost certainly alive and well.

“I think around midnight til about one, maybe a little after? Definitely late. Like annoyingly, *stupidly* late considering I still had to come in early today,” she answers wryly, taking another sip from the paper cup in her hand. “I had to ask for an extra espresso shot, and you know how much I hate that stuff.”

“But where are they? I’ve tried Hannibal’s office and his home phone as well, no answer,” Bloom tells her.

“Well, I don’t know the answer to that *exactly,* but at an educated guess I’d say wherever the more romantic, high-end version of a sleaze motel with a vibrating bed and a heart-shaped jacuzzi is.”

Alana suddenly looks deeply unimpressed and unamused by Katz’s brand of wit. “You and your friends may joke amongst yourselves about a good man’s reputation however you like, Agent Katz, but I would appreciate not being reminded about the deplorable content of Freddie Lounds’ off-color journalism, thank you.” Beverly had been lifting the cup to her face again for another sip, but her hand freezes on the way there as she processes this reaction from the other woman, and namely what it implies about how out of the loop Alana actually is.

“Oh shit,” she breathes out again, this time without any trace of humor. “You didn’t know.” As it finally becomes clear to her that Beverly isn’t joking, Alana’s expression loses all animation, going entirely closed off and still.

Jack clears his throat, giving a sidelong glance to the psychiatrist that she doesn’t appear to notice. “Where did you see them last night, Bev?” he prompts her to continue.

“At an all-night chapel in Elkton,” she says, now awkwardly avoiding the other woman’s eyes. “Graham called, uh, around ten I guess, and asked me to be their witness.”

Jack obviously does not expect that answer, but honestly who would? It’s not every day your work friend who seems to have all his shit together suddenly elopes with his much younger lover in the middle of the night without telling anyone but a mutual acquaintance. Even more surprising when the young lover happens to be someone else you know and would also never expect that level of spontaneity from.

“This is…not the most appropriate timing for that sort of thing,” Jack says mildly, as if pointing this out to Katz could somehow retroactively change events. She thinks Bloom’s face might also twitch, but without looking directly at her, it’s gone too quick for Katz to catch it and be sure.

“That’s what I said, but honestly I think that was kind of the point. Like it was some ‘we-could-die-whenever, so YOLO’ kind of split decision-making. I don’t know. I wasn’t there for that part.” She shrugs. “All I do know is that if I’d said no, Lecter was just going to pay some rando off the street to sit in the pews for fifteen minutes and sign on the dotted line. Figured someone who at least knew them a little had to be better than a total stranger.” That, and it’s a personal philosophy of hers never to turn down an opportunity for a new experience that might also make an interesting story to tell her friends about later.

“Excuse me,” Bloom says without any inflection, not looking at either of them, and quickly exits the room without another word to anyone.

The two of them are left standing awkwardly in the uncomfortable silence she leaves in her wake. *“Soooo*…you also getting the impression this might turn into a homicide case after all?” Katz tries to joke. “No? Just me?”

Jack sighs, still staring out the door Alana just left through. “This was really bad timing on their part,” he just repeats, then shifts his focus back to Katz. “I’ll see you and the boys down in the lab in ten,” he says, business as usual. Beverly leaves, grateful for the dismissal, as well as the chance it gives her to fill Jimmy and Brian in before their shift properly starts.

*

Several Hours Earlier

“Why Ms. Katz?” Hannibal asks, shutting the turn signal off once he completes the change of lane, obeying traffic laws and rules of roadway courtesy even when theirs is one of the few vehicles out on the road at this hour and they’re ostensibly in a hurry. Will resists the impulse to make fun of him since an easily avoidable accident or traffic ticket would obviously put a damper on their current plans.

“I can appeal to her sense of fun and adventure, even if it’s an inconvenience otherwise. Having someone on Crawford’s team who can corroborate our alibi for the night doesn’t hurt either.”

“Is that what this is? An alibi?” Hannibal asks with a thread of amusement in his voice.

“Among other things,” Will responds, just as dry, cutting his eyes to the other man before returning his attention to the phone and dialing Katz’s number. “Now hush.” He’s fortunately also right in guessing that Beverly Katz isn’t the type to turn into bed this early even on a work night.

Hannibal waits until their conversation has ended and Will hangs up to speak again. “I believe the next turn is coming up?” he says, fairly confident, though he phrases it like a question. Will nods, already pulling the app back up so he can continue giving the man directions although he clearly doesn’t need much help, having already memorized their route for the most part after his own initial glance at the map. Another useful skill honed over years of tracking prey.

“She doesn’t live in Baltimore. Should get to Elkton at least an hour behind us,” Will forewarns to temper both of their expectations. Knowing that, he’s grateful that she agreed at all, even if her attendance is only one tiny piece of the overall picture he wants them to paint.

“That will be enough time to finalize our other preparations,” the alpha notes, not bothered by the small delay.

“Don’t get your hopes too high for that either. I don’t think being the quickie marriage capital of Maryland means this town’s gonna have a 24-hour Tiffany store to browse through.”

“Perhaps their Wal-Mart jewelry department will have pieces available in our sizes,” Hannibal says, his delivery so perfectly deadpan that Will nearly chokes on spit.

“No personal violinists though,” the omega laments after a quick recovery. “But at least their selection of tuxes ought to include deals for a free clip-on tie.” It’s almost like any other outing with just the two of them, the way they continue to trade quips back and forth, if not for the thrum of anticipation building in the car as they near their destination.

‘Preparations’ in the end really only amount to grabbing an emergency marriage license from the post office—which is weird to start with, and even weirder that the bored-looking overnight attendant has an entire stack of them already pre-stamped by the city clerk and hands one over to them for only thirty bucks and the briefest of glances at their IDs, but Will supposes that’s why this sleepy little town is *the* place on the east coast to get hitched in a hurry, since Vegas it most certainly is not—and discussing ‘package options’ over jasmine tea with the owner of the chapel. The backrooms smell pleasantly of herbs and honey and the owner herself is the officiant as well as the local masseuse, acupuncturist, *and* beekeeper, she informs them with a quality of cheerful dreaminess to her expression and voice. At least one of those feels a little…*out of place,* even for a floaty blonde hippie who never saw a reason to move on past the era of flower power and free love, but they’re only here to engage *one* of her many offered services.

“We really don’t need anything fancy,” Will tells her before Hannibal can opt them into a bunch of extras they don’t need. “We just want to be married as soon as possible.” He can’t help smiling at the word, the unreality of this moment feeling more real by the second, and Hannibal squeezes his hand back lightly in response.

“Keep it simple,” she says, nodding, and Will gets the sense she approves even though ‘no extras’ certainly means less money for her. “Good for you both. Too many folks get so caught up in whizbangs and distractions, they forget to celebrate the world around them and what they have. But not you boys, I can tell.” Will wonders if she’d be saying that had she seen Hannibal in his usual get-up. The alpha had opted to dress down by leaving his vest and tie behind in the car while Will had dressed “up” only by throwing on a spare button-up shirt from Hannibal’s go bag over his T-shirt, so they would kind of match if one didn’t look too closely at the shoes and pants they had on.

“I have one or two patients who would certainly benefit from an outlook like yours, Ms. Pimms,” says Hannibal, the sort of smile on his face which signifies that Will’s not the only one getting a certain *unique* vibe from their encounter with this woman.

“Really? Oh, I hope you’ll send them my way sometime then,” she replies, eyes shining.

“I’ll recommend your services when I next see them.”

“Wonderful!” Pimms bounces up from her seat. “Would you like to begin now?”

“We’re just waiting for our friend to arrive to bear witness.”

“Oh right, of course! Sorry if I’m being overeager. I get so excited about weddings.” She holds the two of them in a gaze of untempered delight. “I just *love* love!”

After not too much longer, the crunch of tires over the loosely graveled driveway lets them know the last member of their wedding party has arrived.

“Wow,” Katz says as she walks into what was obviously once the living room of a cute country house refurbished to serve as a place of ceremony, with a long rug draped down the center of the wood floor between a small handful of aisles of padded chairs, the fireplace obviously never used and teeming with flowering houseplants both inside and over the mantle, tea lights strung in crisscrossed patterns across the ceiling. “I’m really not being pranked. You guys are actually going through with this.”

“We are,” Will smirks at her visible surprise.

“Thank you for coming, Ms. Katz,” Hannibal greets, shaking her hand warmly.

“No way I’d miss this. You’re clearly both nuts and I’m going to revel in the fact that I get video evidence of it,” she adds, pulling out her smartphone as she takes her seat. No time is wasted after that, for which Will is grateful. He would have asked the Pimms woman to just marry them both and have it done with already had it not been his idea to invite someone from the FBI in the first place.

The officiant’s lines are technically important to the ceremony, he realizes, but ultimately they wash over his ears like a bright hum in the background, their inflection rather than the words themselves cueing him when it’s his turn to deliver his own softly uttered, “I do,” following Hannibal’s, his eyes never leaving the alpha’s. The only relevant difference to Will’s mind between doing this surrounded by fairy lights and honeyed perfume hanging in

the air or in the clinical austerity of a courthouse is that the latter would have kept them waiting until morning, a delay which became intolerable to consider the moment this became a real possibility. He lost the last of his patience somewhere between keystrokes of the piano and the chaste brush of lips against his bare knuckles.

Pimms murmurs one final statement, the only part of which Will catches is the tail end, "… the bride." Then Hannibal dips his head lower and Will leans in to bridge the rest of the short gap, and the two of them share their second kiss, now officially husbands just hours after the first.

"Saw an all-night diner on the drive into town that I guarantee makes better coffee than the gas station down the street. Buy me one for the road?" Katz requests as they step outside again a short while later.

"If you're not in a hurry to get back, Will and I can certainly spare the time for more than just coffee. It's the very least we can offer for the generous gift of your company tonight." Said omega lets out a scandalized gasp.

"Who the hell are you and what happened to the fussy, high-society gourmand I just got hitched to?"

"Alas, my kitchen is too many miles away to be of use and we must allow Ms. Katz some time to return home at an *almost* reasonable hour, my dear." Will hums doubtfully, still playing along though he also sincerely suspects the alpha will do no more than delicately pick at whatever dish is placed in front of him, to give the appearance of eating along with them both while actually taking only a bite or two at most for politeness's sake only.

"I'm starting to get why you two are a thing now," says Katz as she observes with the air of one who wishes she was reaching into a bowl of popcorn right now. "I also hoped you'd catch onto what I was hinting there, doc. Even shotgun weddings need a good reception, and day-old pie à la mode is much better than some bland wedding cake anyway," she adds without a single shred of irony. "Don't think this means I'm not still expecting an invite to one of those fabled dinner parties I've been hearing about though!"

"We wouldn't dream of throwing the next one without you," Hannibal assures her as he opens the car door for Will, who slides back into his seat with a roll of his eyes and a tiny irrepressible smile for every casual "we" that comes out of the other man's mouth. They're an inseparable unit now, for better or worse. That would have been an intolerable prospect not too long ago. Now it seems as though everything else, both good and ill, has always been leading up to this.

It truly could have been anyone they invited to attend, even a stranger, anyone except for Abigail. She's the only one too important to be part of this moment that's really just for the two of them, the only one who wouldn't have faded decoratively into the background scenery even as he and Hannibal politely bantered and took her to dinner as thanks for coming. By the time they part ways with Katz again and start the drive back to the cliff house, it already feels like they're the only two people in the world, not too dissimilar from how it had felt between them as Hannibal cut into Matthew's abdomen earlier that night and showed Will how to safely remove a kidney and parts of the liver.

In the darkened house, he turns to Hannibal before the other man can turn up the lights again, drawing him in closer with no more than a simple tug on his sleeve. The alpha comes to him easily without complaint, their mouths finding each other again in the dark, hands skimming lightly, almost polite, under shirts to find skin. Will allows himself to be walked backwards down the hall as the last of their layers are slowly shed between them one by one.

The alpha noses at his throat, and Will shudders and purrs at the feeling. He takes the initiative to push Hannibal against the bedroom door as soon as it is closed behind them and return the gesture, scenting him and taking in the view as he rakes fingernails down a delightfully furred chest, snagging them in soft wiry hairs dusted with silver and gold. The window blinds have been pulled aside in here as well, painting the room in stars and moonlight.

He gasps into the other man's mouth as a thumbnail drags lightly over his nipple in further reciprocation. Shirts and shoes have been left abandoned like scattered breadcrumbs throughout the house, but they are still woefully overdressed otherwise, and Will moves to rectify this now, starting with the other man's belt.

Familiar patterns would tell him that once they are fully bared to one another, they should already be halfway towards horizontal in a tangled mass of sweat and limbs, rocking against each other in a mutual race toward their little deaths, quick gratified sounds also quickly ended. It is wholly unsurprising, however, to learn that Hannibal Lecter is the sort of alpha who prefers to slowly savor and take apart piece by piece, guiding Will to sit perched at the edge of the mattress before joining him there, side by side, with hands that don't so much grasp and manhandle, at least not yet, as they do skim across skin in unpredictably varied degrees of pressure, so that at some touches Will is allowed to arch in and return the favor while at others he is left shivering and goosepimpled by the barely there promise of fingertips.

In those moments of feather-lightness, it's like Will's hands forget they could reach back harder and more needful if they wanted to, force the other man to stop his teasing and push them both over the edge. If the hand running over Will's flank is delicate and soft, so is the one trailing down Hannibal's spine. If on the other hand, Hannibal's fingernails dig in hard enough to leave scattered crescent moons in their wake, so do Will's, and the next curve of their mouths slotting together becomes a sharp nip along the alpha's bottom lip.

With hands and mouths they come together, not the ecstasied frenzy of penetration Will has come to always expect of lovemaking, but in a kaleidoscope of mirrored strokes and licks, eventually swallowing each other down like the ouroboros.

And again not an hour later, when Will reenacts a half-remembered dream by straddling the other man's hips and settling his teeth against Hannibal's throat, breaking skin as they grind against one another and paint a dripping, sticky mess of mutual completion into the space between their bodies. Hannibal mirrors his bite into the unblemished side of Will's neck as their connection starts to form, strengthening it and speeding it up in the process.

They collapse together against the rumpled bedsheets, bodies and minds both a sweaty tangle, twin threads of satisfied contentment and an indescribable sense of wholeness and belonging. For the next few weeks, Will knows from prior experience, the bond will feel

almost supernatural, a force connecting them so deeply it will seem as though they can read each other better than they read themselves, before that heightened awareness of each other fades over time back to normalcy.

For now, there are no words exchanged as they lie there and curl up into one another, their only witnesses from the bluff outside their window being silent, scattered pinpricks of fire in the night sky above and roiling waves in the midnight black waters below.

Chapter End Notes

Beverly Katz is 100% that coworker you know who always has the best gossip and the craziest stories, largely because she gives off great vibes and has such a rep for being pretty much down for anything that she's *everyone's* favorite go-to person, constantly being asked for the weirdest of favors and getting invited to all the zaniest parties. This was, like, a normal Tuesday for her. xD

End Notes

Fear not, my darling fellow trash buddies, this is primarily a hannigram fic but there will be more dolargram in the form of flashbacks throughout, because I love to have my cake and eat it too. ;)

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